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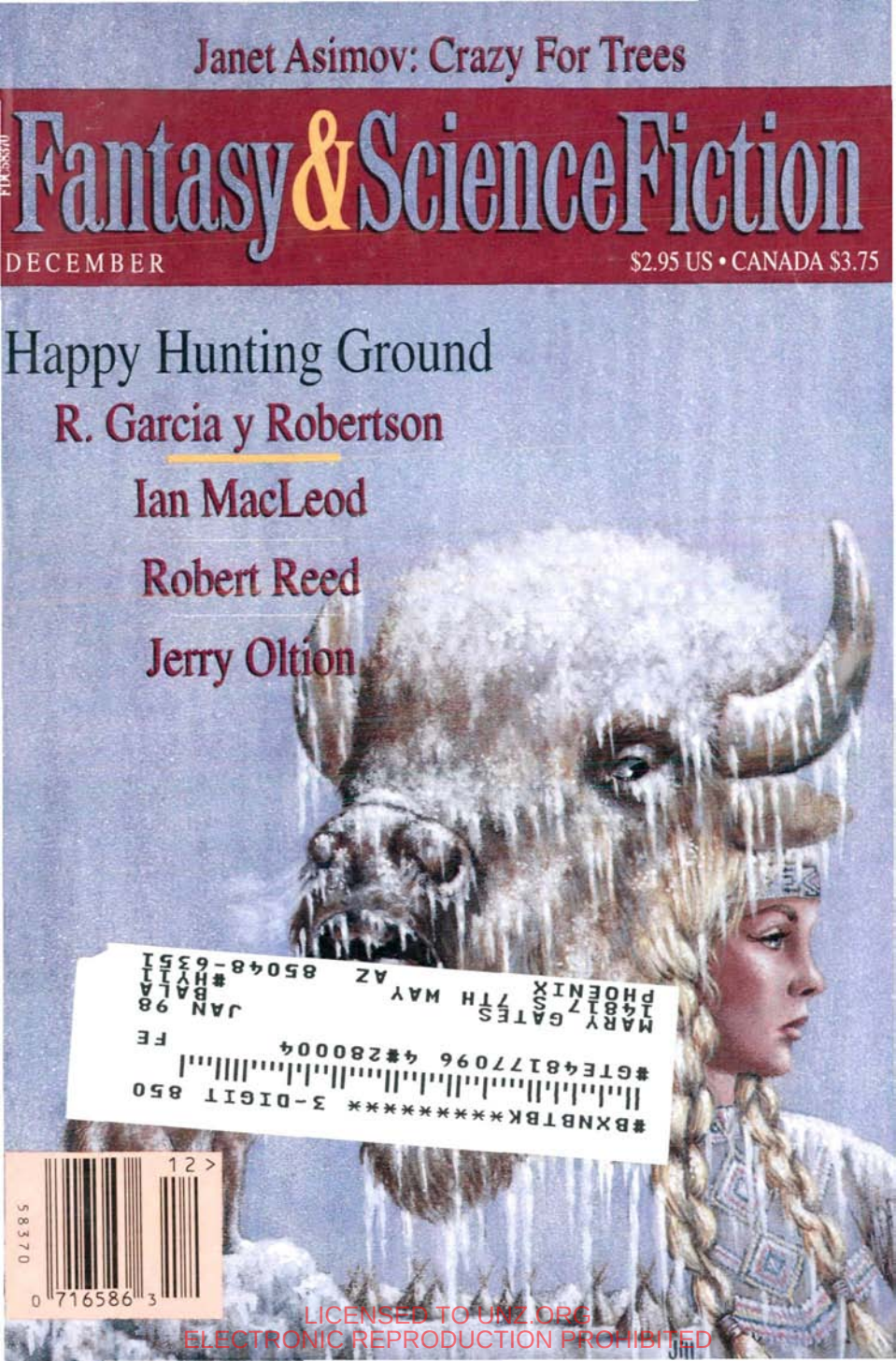

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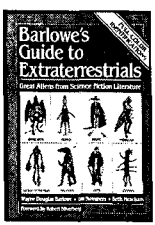

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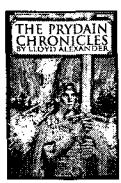

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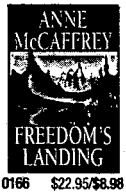

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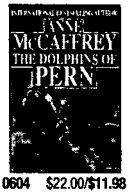

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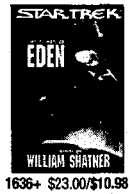

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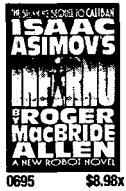

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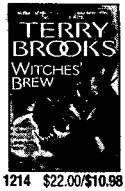

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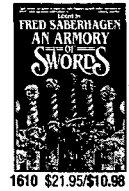

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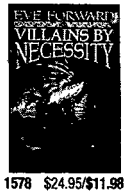

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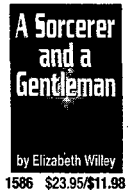

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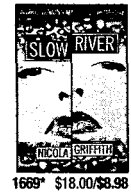

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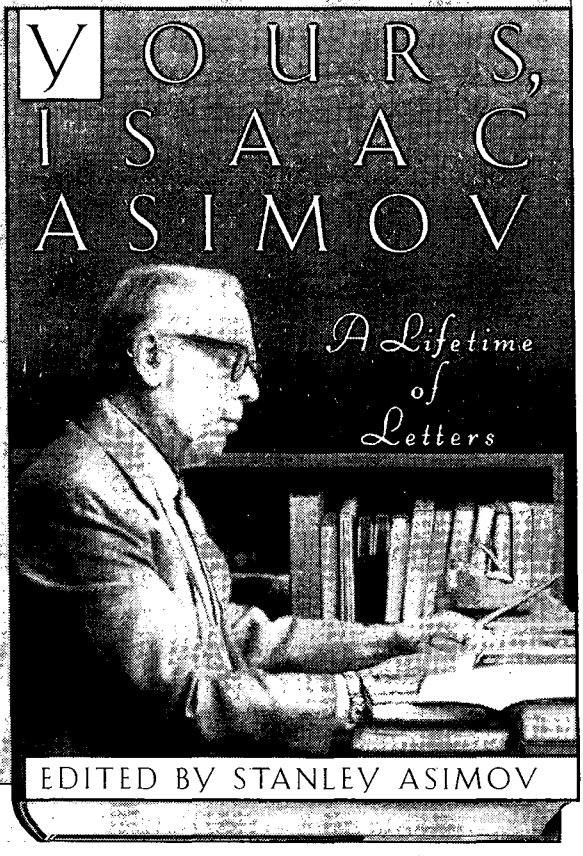
HUNDREDS OF NEVER-BEFORE-PUBLISHED LETTERS open countless new windows on the inimitable Asimov's celebrated genius, wit, and charm. Correspondents include Newt Gingrich ("Place yourself above partisan politics"), Stephen King ("I get a bestseller about as often as you don't get one"), Linus Pauling, Woody Allen, and many more —a trove of "Asimoviana" reflecting, as he observed, "thoughts and feelings that are sometimes hard to say out loud."



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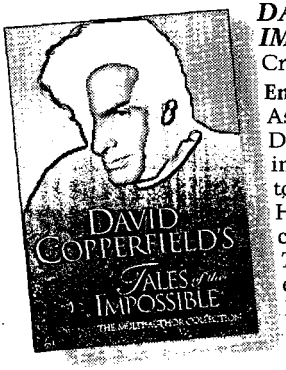

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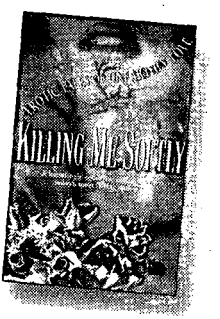

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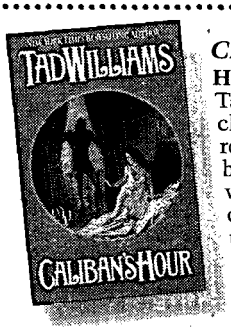

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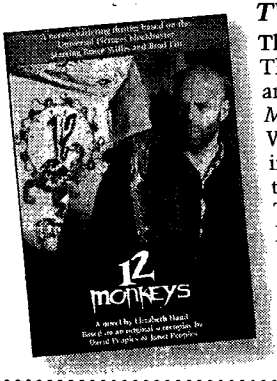

TWELVE MONKEYS Elizabeth Hand

The #1 Thriller of the Year, 2035

This Christmas, science fiction is going ape at the movies and the bookstore with the simultaneous release of *12 MONKEYS*. Based on the Universal picture starring Bruce Willis and Brad Pitt, the movie tie-in is sure to be infectious. *Entertainment Weekly* calls the story "a virus thriller. A romance. And sci-fi too." The year is 2035 A.D. The place is a post-apocalyptic America. Mankind's last hope is James Cole (Willis), a dangerous outcast who must travel back to the year 1990 to discover what killed the world. Clue #1: Twelve dancing monkeys.

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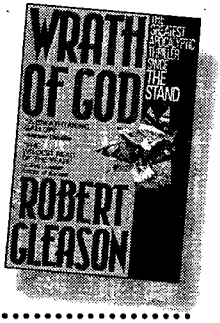
WRATH OF GOD Robert Gleason

The greatest apocalyptic thriller since *The Stand*.

If *12 Monkeys* lit the apocalyptic fuse for December, Robert Gleason's *WRATH OF GOD* has to be the explosion. Clive Cussler calls this spectacular first novel "the wildest read of the year." As the barbarian armies of a modern day Khan bear down on America, a ragtag army of cowboys led by an old woman make their final stand—with a little help from their friends George Patton, Stonewall Jackson and Amelia Earhart, who come to their aid via a rip in time to fight the ultimate battle.



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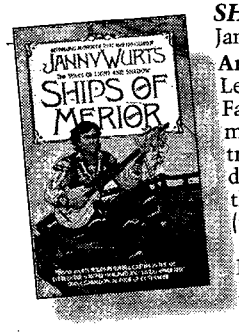

SHIPS OF MERIOR: **Wars of Light & Shadow, Vol. I**
Janny Wurts

Another masterpiece from the pallet of Janny Wurts.

Let your imagination set sail to places unknown, as World Fantasy Award-winning artist Janny Wurts takes you on a magical journey to Athera to witness a terrifying prophecy come true. As two princes battle for supremacy over light and darkness the fate of the world's mystical powers are entangled in the throes of their blood feud. This is the first of two volumes (the second will be published in February 1996).

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

FOR THE SECOND week in a row, a bookseller has complained to *Publisher's Weekly* that Barnes and Noble Superstores are stealing the bookseller's business. Now I know that Barnes and Noble has made some devastating choices for local booksellers; opening down the block from the biggest competitor, offering discounts the local bookseller can't beat, and spending outrageous amounts of advertising dollars to bring in customers. I empathize with the local bookseller. I've owned two small businesses myself (not counting my writing business) and I know how a wealthy and motivated competitor can cut into business.

I also know how small businesses cut their own throats.

A small bookstore should maintain customer loyalty. A small bookstore should be able to compete with the superstore by offering a friendly, Sunday-afternoon-with-friends atmosphere, by giving personal service that goes an extra mile (ordering one copy of special books, for example, or by having in-depth knowledge of writing, writers, and the books offered). Some bookstores are successfully competing this way.

But I've had enough of these complainers who end their tantrum at the superstores with comments like one from a New York bookseller: "There is nothing else I could have done. There isn't a single service we don't offer. [But] as far as adapting, if we tried to be everything to everybody, we couldn't compete. None of us here got into the book business to sell Jackie Collins."

Or this from a Montana bookseller who refuses to carry bestsellers and whose revenues also declined: "The store aims to stock fiction intended for people with IQs higher than a beach towel's."

Excuse me?

I have an IQ significantly higher than a beach towel's and I have read three of the books on PW's fiction mass market bestseller list (published in the same issue as that last complaint)

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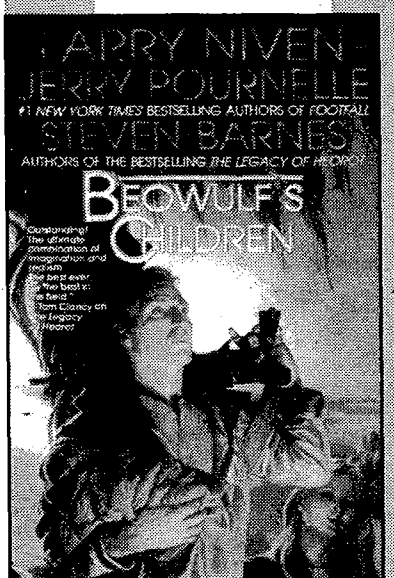
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and one on the hardcover fiction list (with two more in my to-read pile).[1] Does this make me brainless?

Before you answer that, consider the other books I have read this summer. *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the Twenties* by Ann Douglas; *Inventing America* by Garry Wills; and *Of Long Memory: Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers* by Adam Nossiter.[2] I also read a pile of Batman comic books, every issue of the *New Yorker*, and the four Dell digest magazines. I have dipped into several science fiction and mystery anthologies, reading the stories I wanted to read. I also read at least six (maybe seven) romance novels, including Lynn Michael's *Nightwing* (which is also an intriguing vampire tale). I read *The Best American Short Stories* and *The Best American Essays*.

But I know, for a fact, that I would have walked into those two bookstores mentioned above, turned around and walked out.

Why?

Because they judged their customers.

None of us here got into the book business to sell Jackie Collins.

Why not? Had anyone in the store *read* Jackie Collins? I have, and I don't particularly like her brand of glitz. But I have read her, and I will defend to the death someone else's right to read her. Unfortunately that someone else will have to go to Barnes and Noble to both get the book and avoid the attitude at the checkout counter.

When I grew up, I was taught that people who read have open minds. I learned, when I was in college, that people who had open minds only read certain books. The rest of the books were for everyone else, for those people with IQs lower than a beach towel's (apparently). So I hid my romances in my history textbooks, and I bought my science fiction at a large Waldenbooks where the clerks didn't know me and didn't comment on what I read. I would buy the Updike and the Anne Tylers at the local "literary" bookstore because I knew that those books were on the "approved" list.

And gradually, I stopped going to those stores.

I still bought the occasional "literary" novel—I still do. I have eclectic tastes. But now I sniff the air

[1] For the curious, those books are: *The Body Farm* by Patricia Cornwell, *Born in Ice* by Nora Roberts, *Dixie City Jam* by James Lee Burke, *Burning Angel* by James Lee Burke, *The Rainmaker* by John Grisham, and *Rose Madder* by Stephen King.

[2] And I must confess, as I was reading this one in a coffee shop near the University of Oregon, some guy at the table next to me asked if I was reading the book for a class or for fun. When I answered for fun, he looked at me as if he couldn't believe anyone would read non-fiction for fun.

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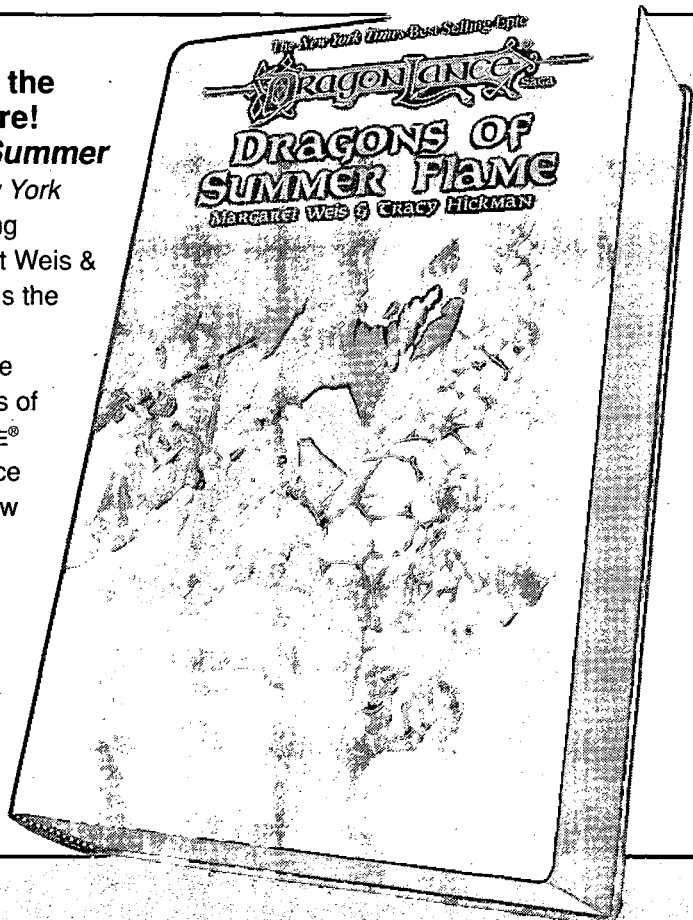

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before I enter a bookstore. And if the air is too rarefied, I leave.

Apparently, so does everyone else.

How does this relate to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*? It relates in several ways. First, it relates to the discussions we've had a few months back about getting kids to read. If we, as adults, are being judged on what we read, it's twice as bad for children. We ship those attitudes down to them. A reader recently wrote to me that he read everything he was "supposed to" in order to learn and learned only to hate reading prescribed literature. A bad, bad thing, I think. People should love reading.

Secondly, this snobbish attitude appears in science fiction. Science fiction readers rarely admit to reading romance, and certainly will not cop to reading literary fiction. One sf reader, in a letter, told me he reads sf because "science fiction is difficult. Only intelligent people can understand it." I wrote back and told him that his attitude frightened me. Some books should cater to the very intelligent, but not all of them. Some of us, with the IQs of beach towels, like to be entertained.

Finally, and most importantly I think, this attitude — if it continues — will cripple writers ("Am I writing something Important? Literary? Worthy of being called a Classic?") and it will force many readers to hide their favorite books beneath the jackets of more acceptable books. It will also stifle important discussion.

Anne Rice put it best in a recent interview in *Rolling Stone* (Italics mine):

> I have a real problem with much of the so-called literary fiction of these times.... I think there's a real arrogance in the pedestrian realism of the 20th century novel. Not only are books about ordinary people and ordinary lives and ordinary events and little-bitty epiphanies, not only are they *not* worth reading most of the time, they're simply garbage. I think our literature is at a low ebb right now, and there's a lot of reasons we came to this point where we turned away from the incredible power of Nathaniel Hawthorne or Herman Melville or Edgar Allan Poe and have chosen instead to write a diluted version of Henry James over and over again.
>
> The reasons are, I think, more economic than the elite would like to face. It's an outgrowth of industrialization, really. It's the literature of quiet desperation or contentment — a literature that tells you that to try to attempt anything great in your life is unre-

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alistic to the point of being irresponsible and dangerous. It tells you that any novel of substance is going to be about normal people in Connecticut or Berkeley and their quarrel over the custody of the children and how they both work it out, each in her or his own way.

The truth is that is not the only story we have to tell. That is not even what our world is about. Our world is in fact filled with abnormal people and outrageous people and cataclysmic events and extremely romantic stories and acts of incredible heroism, and yet for some reason the upper-middle-class literary writers have decided that that's not worthy subject matter for their books. And they're dogmatic and nasty about it.[3]

Readers of this magazine will note (and have noted) that I like a good piece of surrealism, some nice stylistic writing with very little plot. I also like an occasional story about ordinary people doing ordinary things whose lives are touched by a bit of wistful magic. And I like the stories about heroes and heroines, evil villains, and terrible world-destroying events. I get letters agreeing with my tastes on some of these stories, and disagreeing with my tastes on others.

And that's how it should be.

I am tired of supposedly open-minded people calling an entire branch of the science fiction field crap, especially when those people haven't read the books in question. I am tired of people who believe that only one story should be told. I am tired of being told I have an IQ lower than a beach towel because I read many things instead of prescribed, approved, and certified smart-people books.

To those bookstore owners who complain that the superstores nearby are stealing customers, look around. Maybe the customers are leaving for reasons other than location, discounts, and advertising dollars. Maybe the customers are leaving because they can buy the books they want without defending themselves.

I know I have.

[3] *Rolling Stone*, July 13-27, 1995, page 98.

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Leonard Rysdyk made his first appearance in F&SF *in our March issue. His short fiction has also appeared in* Aboriginal SF *and* Snow White, Blood Red.

This story was inspired by his wife's work as a neo-natal intensive care nurse. "I've always felt a little guilty that women have to go through childbirth when men don't," he writes. "Hence 'So Tender and Mild.'"

So Tender And Mild

By Leonard Rysdyk

EVERYONE WHO CAME TO the NICU shivered with pleasure and shone with pride: Nora and Dick glowed as they came through the airlock. Misha and Dolores, bounding to make their shift, grinned in mid-glide. Even Nicky and Nicola, who had been through this so many times they had won an award for reproduction, were cooing over their new son. And why not? What greater pleasure was there than to be licensed as a parent and visit your tiny, red offspring until he or she was fat and pink enough to take home? Brahms played incessantly while bright mobiles wobbled from monitor stands and the madonnas blinked serenely. All was right on the Moon.

Marina and Beaumont leaned forward so their faces, as bright with bliss as any of the other parents', were close to the dark bubble of Stefan's isolette. Past their distorted reflections, they could see the dim shape of their son hanging upside down, his head huge, his tiny hands and feet twitching vigorously. Just out of reach, a blue snap connected two red tubes and one blue tube from the ECMO unit to the two arteries and one vein of Stefan's

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umbilical cord. As visiting hours ended, Angela, the nurse practitioner, squeezed her ample hips between the crowded isolettes to check the madonna. When she smiled, her white teeth shone from her dark face almost as brightly as the expressions of the proud parents. Beaumont held up a tiny New York Mets jersey before his son's still-sealed eyes.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Marina said to Angela.

"He looks like a little deep-sea diver in there," Beaumont said.

"He?" Angela said. She reached forward quickly and checked the chart. Then she looked at the parents whose faces were full of confusion and fear and said calmly, "Oops!"

"What do you mean, 'oops'?" Beaumont said angrily.

"If there's something wrong with my baby, I want to know now," Marina said.

"It's so crowded in here," Angela said, "and I didn't see you come in — "

"Tell me!" Marina said.

"Stefan's been moved. He's over there in number eighteen. This is Nazli Nazarian. I'm sure she enjoyed your visit as much as Stefan would have. Sorry." The tone sounded and visiting hours were over.

Life support systems were turned down in the compartments during sleep shift, and they felt as small and cold as igloos, but Marina sat up in bed, staring into the dark. The covers had slid down to her waist and her nipples were so hard they hurt. Beaumont's hand touched her thigh. He stirred and asked her what was the matter.

"I didn't know my own child," Marina said. "I couldn't even tell what sex it was. This can't be right."

"I'm sorry we missed Stefan, too, Marina," Beaumont said in his thin, calm voice. "But the isolettes are dark, and the babies are so young. Through the glass, they all look alike."

"I gave Stefan life. I'm supposed to be his mother but I don't know anything more about him than a fish in a bowl."

"He does look a little like a fish, doesn't he?"

"Beaumont!"

"You'd rather carry him?" Beaumont sat up beside her and hugged his arms to his chest against the cold. "Seriously?"

Marina didn't answer.

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"We chose early delivery when we came to the moon. It's the only way to have babies here, just like in space. Regular childbirth just isn't safe — "

"They've never proved that."

"Do you want to be the guinea pig? After all the miscarriages the Japanese had on L-5? Besides, the real point about ED is that it sets you free. Makes you biologically equal to men. That's what you used to tell me, isn't it? It's one of the reasons we decided to come here, and for the money."

"It's unnatural."

"We're on the moon, Marina. Everything here is unnatural."

Marina pounded her fists against her knees, one hard sudden blow that the cold made sting. "I am really upset about this, Beaumont. I think something is terribly wrong."

Beaumont rubbed her knees for her to take away the hurt. "It's a trade-off, like everything else in life, a compromise. Every freedom has its price."

She leaned against him and felt his skin was stiff with cold. "Tonight it seems like a high price."

He put a thin arm around her shoulders. "Angela said he's thriving. In a little while, he'll be out of the isolette. You can hold him in the Growers-and-Gainers room. We'll be his mom and dad. We'll pick him up at daycare and struggle to get him to eat his vegetables. Just like we planned. It'll be all right. Really."

He tried to draw her down under the covers, but she tensed up as if she were frozen. Finally, she said, "I'm going back to the NICU in the morning before my shift."

"That's against policy."

"But not against the rules."

"I'll go too. Now, come under the covers before you freeze." She settled in next to him and pulled the crisp metallic hood of her pillow over her head. "Your mother told me you were stubborn," Beaumont said.

She pressed herself against him. "You never listened to my mother any more than I did."

"Good thing." He held her in the curve of his body until they both were warm.

The nurse practitioner's round black face drooped when she saw them early the next morning. "This may not be a good time," Angela said. She

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stood between the parents and the darkened bubble in which their son floated.

Beaumont said, "If he's sleeping, we'll just ogle him from a distance." He was already wearing the cowl of his space suit and it made his face look even longer and thinner than usual.

"He's all right, isn't he?" Marina said and her hair shook slowly in the low gravity as she tried to peer past Angela.

"Actually, he's doing a little less well than we would like," Angela said.

"Less well?" Marina's small body twitched as if ice had been poured down her shirt. An IV pole rattled as she squeezed passed Angela and in between the crowded isolettes. On a stainless steel cart, in his plastic bubble of synthetic amniotic fluid, her son Stefan floated, aged twenty-two weeks. His limbs were still and his head hung down like a stone.

"There's arrythmia," Angela explained gently, dispensing each datum like a pill to parents whose mouths gaped. "His potassium is high; the kidneys are shutting down." The madonna whirred agitatedly, desperately trying to adjust Stefan's electrolytes.

"How long?" Marina said. She touched the bubble. It was warmer than her hand.

"Since last night," Angela said. She put her large hands in the pockets of her lime-green scrubs and shifted her weight. Her white shoes gave a little squeak on the pink and blue linoleum tiles. "It's very unusual."

"I mean until he's well," Marina said.

Angela almost whispered, "Hours, maybe days. After that..." her voice became formal, as if taking its tone from the cool blue monitoring machines "...the unit will have to assess its options."

"What does *that* mean?" Beaumont said.

Angela looked at him angrily; she was the one who had to do the dirty work. "What do you think it means?" she said.

"Stefan!" Marina shrieked. The other nurse looked up from the changing table.

"You hush, now," Angela hissed. She put her fists on her ample hips. "Take your hands off the glass. You think he can't hear you?"

"I want to stay with him," Marina said.

"Impossible."

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"He's my child. He came out of my body." Her face flushed and wrinkled like a dishrag.

"I'll call the union," Beaumont said.

"Don't you threaten me," Angela said. Then she sighed and turned up her pale palms. "I'll see what I can do."

Marina sat in a folding chair and watched the madonna's needles twitch. She still wore her plastic-piped sub-suit. She had come directly from her shift without showering, and she could smell her perspiration coming up through the collar. At the end of the unit, Georgine sat in the rocker cooing to a thirty-four weeker. The bentwood antique looked out of place and it sent a rhythmic creek through the NICU that gleamed and smelled of disinfectant. An alarm went off. Georgine got up with the premie in her arms and punched instructions into a madonna. "Won't poop," she said quietly. Georgine's plump face was white as a bleach bottle.

"Poor thing," Marina said and turned her eyes back to Stefan.

Marina could count the bumps of her son's spine and she counted them over and over like rosary beads. His nose protruded and his large eyes were smooth-skinned spheres. At twenty-one weeks, Stefan's skin was so transparent, Marina could see the dark red lines of his blood vessels pulse twice each second. The heart monitor traced its own thin red line that flared and subsided erratically. Numbers shot up the scale, then receded as the madonna intervened. Then shot up again until the madonna headed off another emergency. The labels on the dials meant little to Marina: blood oxygen saturation, PaO_2, $PaCO_2$, but she knew they said PAIN! and DANGER! and she knew it should not be a machine that protected Stefan, but her own encircling body. She felt an aching in her womb for the child she should be carrying there. She imagined Stefan inside her, nestled by her hips, floating under the dome of her taut belly and kicking with delight. Marina hugged her waist and leaned over. She brought her head close to his. Stefan reached out his hand; he tried to reach through her uterus. The lids peeled back from his eyes and as he looked at her, his lips moved. A hand touched her shoulder and she snapped awake.

"Oh — sorry," Marina said.

"It's okay. Drink some of this." Georgine gave her a cup of tea.

They stayed the night, one woman on her shift, the other on her vigil, and time crept by. Marina was half asleep when Stefan's heart fibrillated and the

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monitor went crazy. No signal was given when Stefan ceased to live. The madonna's LED's simply went out and the roller pump stopped turning.

THE COMPANY man's demeanor was just right, serious but not somber, friendly but not familiar. A tall thin man in a crisply folded gray suit, he sat on the edge of his desk and listened attentively with his head tilted at just the right angle. When Marina sniffled, his long limp hand offered a tissue from a convenient box. When she sobbed, he gripped her shoulder with a cool touch.

"You're very brave, Marina," he said, his voice resonant and calming. "They say you stayed with little Stefan right to the end — and didn't miss an hour of shift besides. Now you've filed for another license. You should get a commendation!" He raised his hand magnanimously like a televangelist invoking the Lord. "Hell, if we can give a plaque for doubling the efficiency of a payloader — well, you know what I mean. It's people like you that make the Sea of Serenity more than a mining operation. It's a community.

"Nevertheless," he continued, folding his hands modestly on his lap, "we'd like to defer your request for a while. Nature gives you time to come to grips with tragedy, but with our techniques, that interval shrinks to days. Your body is ready, Marina. As early as this afternoon, you could accept and carry a child the full twenty weeks — "

Her body become taut. "I want to! I mean, I have a right to choose."

The company man held out his hands. "Of course. No one can take that right away — who would even dream of it!" He gripped his hands imploringly. Marina recognized the gesture from the management classes she had taken in college, but even so found it was quite effective. The company man was very good. "But I don't have to remind you that for every right we have a responsibility. Especially here where our lives are so inextricably intertwined." She glared at him but he looked at her with unquenchable kindness and she wondered for a moment what kind of psychiatrist bills his kids must pay. His kids!

"Please," she said.

He reached for her hand and slowly, she gave it up. "The soul takes its own time to mend. We want you to give it that time, the way nature would." His hands were twice as large as hers and damp, despite the climate control.

"We're not saying 'no,' Marina. Just 'not yet.'"

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* * *

Beaumont moaned, quivered, then settled on her with a sigh. With Beaumont at one-sixth his Earthly weight, Marina could hold him on top of her most of the night and often did. She breathed slowly, lifting him with each breath.

When he caught his breath, he said, "I like this part of your plan a lot, Marina." He kissed the inside of her ear and she heard a loud popping sound like radio static. "But what will you do after you get pregnant? What about pre-natal care and what about transfer? You're going to need help, and not just from me."

Marina wiggled her hips so he would roll off. She turned to him, leaning her head on her arm, resting her face close to his so she could feel the warmth of his face.

"I didn't want to tell you," she whispered, "at least until I had worked out the details. I'm not going to transfer the baby."

"What?"

"I'm going to have it myself. I'm going to give birth."

"But that's impossible."

"They tell us it's impossible. And it's true there are problems in space, in zero-g, but we're on the Moon and there's gravity here."

A tone sounded from the air duct. It indicated that life-support was shifting to minimal, that the heat would be turned down and air flow reduced. They would have to get through the night on rest-level rations or pay for full service. Beaumont pulled the thermal blankets up under his chin and thought over her answer.

"Then why would the company go through the expense of early delivery? The NICU is the second most expensive medical technology available. Just the personnel involved — "

"Because it's not an expense; it's a savings. I've been thinking about this a lot. At twenty weeks, a woman barely shows she's pregnant. She can do every aspect of her job. Then one Friday after work, she goes in for ED. A weekend to rest and she's fit again for service. The company doesn't lose a minute's work and in an understaffed operation like this, that means real money. Sure, it costs them some hardware and consumables and they have to hire practs, but in the long run they increase their line workers. Wait a minute." She called out, "Central! Five more minutes full life support." The

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computer answered with a chime and the fan clicked on again. "And half lights. Damn the money. I want to look at you when I'm talking to you." In the yellow light, she appeared propped on her elbow, the hood of the pillow encircling her face. The clock on the night table marked the cost.

Beaumont said, "It's cheaper to get new workers from Earth, like they got us."

"If they just want bodies, sure. But this way, they get people raised at company expense, according to company policy. And they get a population that can't work anywhere else — moon children have 60% less calcium in their bones. Those kids will be stuck here. The company says they are doing ED for us, that it gives women reproductive equality, that it's the best thing since the ERA. I said it myself: Now we are truly equal, biologically as well as socially. I even believed I didn't want to go through pregnancy and the pain of childbirth. But now I see the company doesn't provide early delivery as a personal favor and I think I knew that even then."

"You didn't say anything."

"No, but when I sat up watching Stefan, I knew I'd been fooling myself. And when he died, it hurt like I was being punished."

"Renal failure killed him, Marina, not you."

"But mostly, I'm doing this for myself, Beau. I want to feel my baby kick inside me. I want to ache with it while it's a part of me. And I want the pain of childbirth, maybe to make amends for giving up Stefan — " The fan stopped and the lights went off.

Beaumont's voice came from a dark place beside her. "I'm as much a part of Stefan's life — "

"No man is, Beau, though it's sweet of you to think so." Under the sheets, she touched his hand. "More than any of that, I want — to earn — this one."

"You don't have to."

"Every woman does, Beau. That was the problem."

"When are you due?" said the company man. Instead of meeting her eyes, he ran a finger along one of his suit's crisp folds and watched the fabric fall into place. Withholding approval, Marina thought.

"December." Marina was sitting in the same deep chair feeling tiny as before; he leaned over her again, perched on his desk.

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"No one has ever attempted to give birth in lunar gravity before. After the tragedies of the zero-g miscarriages, the hemorrhaging — augh! No one had the guts — pardon the expression. You'll go down in history no matter what happens. You're a small woman, Marina, but there's a strength in you like steel. I knew it when I first saw you." The hard stare in his watery blue eyes did not show admiration. And you're wound as tight as a spring, Marina thought.

"You can't talk me out of this," she said. "The contract spells out the benefits I'm entitled to: the prenatal care, the maternity leave."

"And a paid period of convalescence, of course. And when you're ready to return to work we'll provide day care until the child is of age. It's not just a generous contract; it's the only one conscionable. Neighbors helping neighbors." His deep voice was full of kindness. But he's wringing his hands, Marina thought. That's not in the manual.

"I was thinking I'd like to raise him myself, too."

The company man hesitated, then smiled agreeably. "What could be more natural?" Then he wrinkled his brow, took his elbow in one hand and touched his lips with the forefinger of the other, as if doing calculations in his head. "With young families, it always comes down to the same question, though, doesn't it?" he said. "Money. You'll pardon me for talking like this, but I started out as an accountant. You and Beaumont will have to make do, but my wife and I made sacrifices when we were starting out. I still think those were the best years of my life. Of course, that was on Earth. What we so often overlook, Marina, no matter how long we are on Luna, is air. You're not used to paying; it's deducted automatically from your check, but believe me it's substantial. Look at your last stub. You'll see that almost forty per cent — but that's because we breathe all the time. I don't see how Beaumont can support the air budget for the three of you."

"Beaumont is with me on this."

"A good man, Beaumont, by all reports." He walked around behind her, a subtle threat, she reminded herself, but again, it worked. "But the reason I wanted to see you was just this: If things get tough, I want you to know that we will be beside you the whole way. If you need us, we'll be there."

"What do you mean?"

He stood close by her chair so she had to lean her head way back and his gentle voice came out of his lined old face like reassurance from on high.

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"Anytime you say so, everything can be put back to normal. We can forget the whole thing."

"You mean my child?"

The company man held out his hands. "Your child, yes. But ours, too, the way every child is part of his community. The usual way here is for the community, for us, to take care of him for you. Now, in many ways, you are simply taking care of him for us. But remember, we are always ready to return the favor." He was at the door, holding it open for her. The interview was over.

Nearly last in the line at the canteen, Marina reached for breakfast items listlessly. Morning sickness made feeding herself hardly worth the effort, but she needed to keep up her strength for her job and for her child. Her child: the thought gave meaning to her nausea. She took a bowl of rice crisps (the bran flakes already gone, dammit) and surveyed the commons while Max ran her card through the register. "Credit's gettin' a little low," he said as he handed her the slip.

She waded among the tables to her usual spot where Eveline and Tom and Niti were dawdling over empty bowls. "You look great," Niti said and got up. "See you later."

"The more it shows, the better you look," said Tom, pointing to her stomach and rising. "Come on, Evvy."

Eveline hesitated. She looked at Marina, then felt Tom tugging at the back of her chair with antique politeness. "I'll call you," she said.

What else could she expect? Marina thought. She sighed and looked at the bowl. Half-buried by the crisps, a piece of paper was sticking up at her unsanitarily. She looked at it. Neatly printed in the register's usual font were the words, "Get out while you can."

Her hands shook so all through her shift, she kept on hitting wrong keys on the console. When she got three error messages in a row, she almost burst into tears. Her payloaders stood idle in the sun long enough for Carl to look over to her for a moment, then reach over and press her reset button. "Hang in there," he said.

When she told Beaumont that evening, he paced back and forth across the compartment, a long step, a quick turn at the wall, then a long step back and turn again. "They're jealous," he said. "That's obvious. You're doing what

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they want to do, but they're afraid to cross the company. What I don't understand is 'get out'? Where can you go?"

"But what if it is a threat? I'd be a perfect target."

"I'll protect you," Beaumont said, but neither of them could imagine how.

All through the checkup, Angela seemed nervous. First, she dropped the doppler head. When she bent to pick it up, she jostled the instrument tray with her hip. "What's the matter?" Marina said.

"Your blood pressure is a little high," Angela said without looking at her. She fumbled with the drape from Marina's knees and had to shake it out and fold it again. "Nothing critical — but I'm going to have to recommend you take it easy for a while." She smoothed the drape fussily.

"What do you mean, 'take it easy'?"

Angela put the cloth away in a tall closet. "Avoid anything strenuous. Take a nap every afternoon." She was so deep in the closet, her words were muffled. She could have been hiding in it. "Take some time off work."

"Time off? Beaumont is doing double overtime to build up savings; we're counting on my paycheck up to the 30th or 32nd week!"

Angela dithered and fussed, while holding her plump arms close to her thick body as if bound at the elbows by ropes. "Under normal circumstances — be extra careful — and the radiation — " She would not look at Marina.

"But can't I just hang on another month? I've already arranged for Indira's job when she retires; I'll be in the control tower then. What's going on?"

Angela's accent was rich with history, of grandmothers who were inner city midwives, of great grandmothers many generations removed who comforted scared slave girls in labor, while the rest of the world looked out for itself. "Partly, we don't know what will happen to fetuses that are carried to term on Luna — or to their mothers."

"What's the other part?" Angela looked to the side, then down at the floor and Marina could see that what the pract had to say was in direct conflict with her tradition. Marina said, "Angela, I'm depending on you. You have a sacred trust."

"I'm doing everything I can do to make sure you come through okay." She looked at Marina for the first time, her eyes wide and white. "That's why I am preventing you from going outside for the rest of your pregnancy."

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"That's eighteen weeks!"

"Why don't you get dressed now and go have some lunch." Angela left the room quickly; her rubber-soled shoes squeaked as she hurried away.

Marina called, "Angela!" but as she gestured for the tech to come back, she realized there was a piece of paper in her hand. It said, "Follow the footprints to the orange door."

BEAUMONT THREW himself into the hammock as if he carried his full earthly weight. "So that's it," he said. "You're on unpaid leave and we have one hundred and fifty ECU's in the bank. Great!"

"I'm sorry." Marina wondered why she was apologizing.

"Well, I can't work any more; there are no more shifts available." He stabbed at his calculator watch. "I make exactly enough from my overtime to pay for your air."

"And we had been hoping to get ahead of ourselves."

"Once you go into labor, the company will pick up the tab, same as usual, and after you leave the infirmary, well, I'll keep my extra hours, I guess."

"You can't go on like this indefinitely. Besides, I never see you. I'll go back to work sooner, that's all. Once the baby's born, I'll put him in daycare like the other mothers."

"I thought you wanted to raise him yourself—the two of us together, like back on Earth?"

Marina raised her voice, "Well, we just can't afford to, can we?"

"And there's nothing inside, or part-time?"

"Surprise: Indira's decided to put in another year. I wonder how they screwed her out of her early retirement benefits."

"Around here, the loopholes have loopholes."

Marina sighed and said a little desperately, "Beaumont, we can always just give in. I mean, we came up here with our eyes open. We knew transferral was the only way to have a family."

"Stefan was my son, too. I know I can never feel the same pain, but — " Stefan's photo looked down on them from the shelf, his tiny arms curled up close to his lidded eyes. "We made our plan. We'll stick to it."

On the way to the shower, Marina looked sideways at herself in the big

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mirror. Not "round," she thought as she passed a hand over her abdomen. Taut, though. As she turned under the soapy water and scrubbed herself with the cloth, the steam got into her lungs and shortened her breath. Around her, vague outlines of other women soaped and stretched like scrupulous ghosts. Six months gone, Marina thought. A wet flank slapped against her briefly. "Sorry," she said. A hand touched her back, but as she turned, she was pushed. She slipped a little on the grating of the floor. Other hands caught her, but they pushed her too. With the water slamming down like distant applause, she heard words — not shouts, but statements; not loud, but clear: curses.

"Yours made of gold?"

"Endanger us all."

"Bitch."

"Whore."

With each curse, they passed her around like a medicine ball. She felt the long, slim muscles of the other women as she recoiled against their bodies. She felt the self-propagating hatred and with each shove she felt the inertia of the baby swinging inside her like the clapper in a bell. "Stop. STOP! I'm PREGNANT!" she said, but her voice was lost among the other voices and the hissing showers and Marina stumbled farther with each shove until finally she fell heavily onto one buttock, felt her skin cut and her muscles bruise. She curled up on the rough grating expecting blows and kicks, but the women disappeared into the mist, left her sobbing in the sizzling fog. Slowly, she picked herself up. Slowly, she walked out to face them, but they were gone as if by magic, or more likely, by plan. In the mirror, Marina turned to examine her bruises, but a different mark caught her eye. She looked at her shoulder and saw a yellow stickynote. Leave NOW, it said. She looked in the mirror and saw another sticker on her hip. This month or next — or NEVER!, and on her flank, We don't WANT you here. She had to reach around to peel a third sticker off her back. Beware the terminator, it said.

She was going to vomit. With a hand over her mouth, she rushed to dress, to get home, fighting back bile and tears.

"Who the hell is the terminator?" Beaumont said.

In her reflection in the computer screen, Marina saw the skin sag under her eyes. Worry, she thought and waited for the topo map to zoom in on the

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coordinates she had found pinned to a pair of her briefs when they came back from the laundry. She touched SURVEY under the INFO menu and a window opened onto a text field.

"That's where the old KREEP mine was," Marina said.

"Call up the photo survey," Beaumont said, "and hurry." In the upper left of the screen, ECU's were accumulating like split seconds. The map was replaced by a photograph of the same region.

"Nothing," said Beaumont and he slammed the table. Suddenly, the cursor took on a life of its own. It tracked over to the company logo in the upper left hand corner and pulled down the NOTEPAD. A window appeared with the words, *"What's keeping you?! Leave before the 15th or the terminator will pass over the colony. It's too dangerous to go in sunlight."*

"Oh, *that* terminator," Beaumont said.

"From airlock 3, head north until you reach Sulpicius Gallus *crater. Skirt its rim until you are heading due west. Go straight into the mountains. We're expecting you."*

"Who's 'we'?" Beaumont said. Marina shrugged and logged off. "Well, I know one thing: the company owns that computer, so they know what's on the system."

Marina leaned back in the chair and curled an end of her thin black hair around her small, graceful forefinger. After a minute, she said, "What if there's something going on? What if there's a refuge out in the Montes Haemus? A group of women who escaped the company, went to the old mine and made a self-sustaining colony like we have here — hydroponics, solar energy cells, all stuff left over from the mine."

"Why there? Why not at the UN telescope or the Japanese mine? Why hadn't we heard about it?"

"We're hearing about it now. Before this, we were loyal employees of the company. We didn't need to know."

Beaumont leaned on the computer desk and bent over Marina. His skin was lined from weariness, worry and overwork. "Does it make sense?" he said. "A group of renegade mothers hiding out there? And they have a bright orange door — how about a 'welcome' sign?" Marina shrugged. "If there are women out there, the company must know about them."

"Maybe."

"And if the company knows, they must be condoning it, silently maybe,

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but still..." Beaumont held out his hands. "What's their purpose? What's the point?"

"I don't know!" Marina covered her face and drew her hands slowly down. The fingertips revealed her creased forehead, her sandbagged eyes, her pale lips. She stared, looking for an answer in the pinpricks of the acoustic panel.

"They have to do something with me, don't you see?" she said. "If I have my baby here, it'll mean anyone can do it and then they lose control. So they need a way to get rid of me, like a release valve. But if they even admit there's another place to have children and live, then they lose control again. Now they know when children will be born, how to staff the NICU, how to set a budget. Why give women a choice? Most may still want early delivery, but some won't. And some may change their minds. Why should the company want to deal with all those contingencies? Now everyone believes she's been spared labor pains and possible tragedy. And they follow the manual in blissful ignorance."

"Why don't they just say 'no'?"

"And start a rebellion? Better to let us think we are free. Better to kill us with kindness," Marina said.

The lights dimmed and Marina stood wearily. "Let's go home and rest," she said.

Beaumont rubbed his forehead. "Suppose there is a refuge, how are you supposed to get there? I can't imagine somebody will give you a ride in a rollagon."

"I don't know," she said. She reached for his hand and saw it was shaking. "Run, I guess, if I'm supposed to escape."

"That's a long way in a space suit. What if you don't find the place. You have to risk your life."

"I don't have to, that's the point. If I go, then I've proven my resolve and they could never have a person like me — "

Marina thought about the women in the shower. They knew about the refuge; they had told her about it. But they had not gone. They had conformed, given in. Chickened out. That's why they hated her even while they helped her.

"What if you don't make it?" Beaumont said morosely. "Will they let you die on the moon? Will that be good for morale?"

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"A company doctor will do the autopsy. They'll say my hormones went crazy. I ran off after some fantasy about a refuge for renegade mothers. Who'd believe that? Everybody would shake their heads and go on with their lives because whether they believe the company or not, believing is in their interest."

"I'd tell them. I'd make them believe."

"The distraught husband of the maniac wife. The louder you talk, the crazier you'll sound. If the company knows anything, it's how to cover its ass."

"Wait a minute. That means there doesn't even have to be a refuge. It could just as easily be a trap," Beaumont said. "Either way, the company gets rid of you. It gets what it wants. Control."

Marina nodded and looked at the floor.

Beaumont embraced her and Marina saw his skin was gray as if in the past weeks, he had aged ten years. "If you ED the fetus," he said quietly, his face close to her ear, "chances are it'll be all right. We can go back to normal. But this other way — I lose you and the baby. I know I agreed, but now the time's coming...." She could feel his trembling in her bones as he held her. "I feel alone already."

"I don't have to decide yet," Marina said. She put her hand on his shoulder. The message had told her where to go, but not how she would get out of the colony.

Marina turned in her sleep and the crackle of her metallic pillow-hood stirred her closer to wakefulness. She had to decide, she thought. The baby moved inside her. Did it sleep, she wondered. Did it dream? Her room was cold and silent; the baby's was warm and loud with the beating of her heart. It stirred again and she jerked as it gave her a kick. It wanted her to decide, too, one way or the other about its future. She felt it reaching out, straining, prying its way out of her womb. Its fingers curled around her labia. It pushed its head against her cervix and she screamed. Where was Beaumont? Maybe on his way to get Angela; she had to be strong for just a few more — but then the baby pushed his shoulder past her cervix and she squirmed and screamed again. Her chest heaved and she felt hot and sweaty. She threw back the covers. In the dim light of her alarm clock's LED's she saw the baby half-emerged from between her legs. A boy! He put his hands on the points of her

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hips and contorted his face and PUSHED down with his arms until his hips burst free from her cervix with a watery POP! and Marina screamed louder even than before while the boy rolled off the bed. "Lights!" Marina called, then, "Beaumont!" and with her head swimming and her body drained, she rolled off the bed after her son. He was lying near the foot of the bed looking up at her. His eyes were a watery blue; his face was long and lined and his hair was thin. His lips made a circle and she drew him to her breast. Her nipple went hard and a feeling of peace and accomplishment filled her as she gave suck to her newborn son. I didn't have to leave after all, she thought. We did it without the company's help and now we're a fait accompli. They'll have to make room for us. We won. She smirked as her son fed. If only Beaumont would get here to see this.

The baby snuggled and grew larger in her arms. Her nipple began to ache and now she knew that it was blood that flowed through her breast, not mother's milk. The boy's shoulders broadened and his legs grew long. She felt his tiny hand encircle hers with a damp touch. And with that touch, she felt herself shrink. Now she was the infant and the baby was holding her. The company man bent his head to her tiny breast, held her close and sucked hungrily. Blue shapes swirled before her eyes. She felt her body jerk and her legs kick in one last spasm. And she felt herself fall.

Beaumont was beside her, calling her name, telling her to wake up. It was cold on the floor, the wall was cold against her bare skin, and the fan whirred to replace the stuffy air. The light hurt her eyes. "It's okay," Beaumont said as he held her. She felt the hairs on his chest move as he breathed deeply, sucking in the stale air. "You don't have to go out there," he said. "They can't make you."

There was a knock on the door. She opened it to see the company man. He wore a gray LUNA BOOMS T-shirt and glasses aided his watery eyes instead of contacts.

"I'm sorry about what happened," he said and looked furtively up and down the hall.

"Happened?" Marina said. "Did something happen to Beaumont?"

"I'm not here officially, you understand." The company man looked as if he were paging through the manager's handbook in his mind; his hands were flopping around trying to find the right gesture. "There's nothing in the

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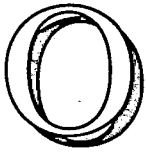
manual — " He held out a yellow notepaper. "These numbers will open the north airlock at 19:00 tonight," he said quickly, tonelessly. "There is a suit in the locker. The override will be disarmed."

"Where's my husband?" Marina said.

"I'm not supposed — I don't know how to say — " Finally, as if he had mentally thrown the book out the window, his hands fell to his sides and he said, "Good luck."

The door fell shut and Marina ran to the telephone. She was still trying to get through to Beaumont when he came in and slammed down his bag. "Goddamnit!" he said. "They dropped me. I'm on straight time from here on in." The second mass-driver had been shut down for repairs and the whole shift laid off. Marina just stared at him, a sickness rising in her throat. "Beaumont," she said and nothing else, but she held out the piece of paper the company man had given her. Beaumont fell into a chair. He covered his sobs with his big hand.



UTSIDE THE airlock, only earthlight eased the darkness. Marina looked up at the huge blue womb and wished it had a higher albedo.

She started slowly, the baby bouncing loosely in the basket of her hips. She lengthened her strides until she glided like a pregnant sprinter coasting in slow motion across the Mare Serenitatis. Her shoulder lights turned the black regolith gray. Any second, she expected to hear a voice order her back or a light from a jet sled to pin her. But her radio remained silent. Something tickled her nose and she realized she was sweating. All that extra weight, she thought. That other person. The baby fussed a little in her belly. Don't kick hard, she thought, as she leaped a small boulder with all the grace of a battle tank. She heard her breath rush against her faceplate. She was panting. Finally, she had to stop and wait for the satellites to overfly. Her bladder burned and as she caught her breath, she relieved herself into her bag and the baby seemed to stretch out and relax. More room now? she whispered. She checked the dial on her wrist. She was on course.

She found the crater rim by stumbling on it, the ground rising more rapidly than her suit lights showed. She turned left and moved slowly, carefully, feeling her way on the broken, sloping ground, stopping every time the polar satellite overflew to be sure she would be traveling due west. She

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was on her second bottle of oxygen and she felt like she was crawling.

Sound crackled in her helmet. "Shuttle to moonwalker, please identify yourself." Marina turned and saw the running lights of a jet craft, coming on fast at high altitude. "Are you all right?" Sub-orbital, she thought. He won't brake for me. She shut down her lights and continued to grope around the crater looking for the west. Don't help me, she thought. Please don't help me.

"Shuttle to moonwalker. Assume your radio is out. Hold your position; I'm sending for help. Mayday! Mayday! Man down on west rim of S. Gallus. 19 degrees, 30 minutes, 20 seconds north, 11 degrees, 40 minutes, 10 seconds west. Hang in there, buddy." Marina saw the tail lights disappear over the horizon. She was still a little south of west, but she had to get away from the crater.

To the west, the ground was broken. She crept over the rocks in the dark, her shoulder lights out. Her stomach twisted with nervousness and the baby shifted uncomfortably. As she hauled the one hundred and thirteen kilograms of herself, her suit and her child up a slope, the sweat streamed and her faceplate began to fog. She had to stop and let her suit cool her. As the mask cleared, the navsat made her still a little south of west. Before she started again, though, she checked the eastern horizon.

It glowed. Dawn was coming after her at two hundred and sixty-seven meters per second and she and her baby were without radiation armor. She scrambled away from the rocky rim of the crater. As the ground flattened, she lengthened her strides. She slanted northwest hoping she was getting close. She sprinted. She flew.

Dawn moves across the moon about as fast as a good sprinter. Marina had a good lead on the sun, but she did not know how fast she was going or where. She imagined herself running endlessly, through the mountains and onto the Mare Vaporum beyond, one foot in the shadow, one in the light, half a step ahead of the dawn. She was panting again. This must remain an aerobic exercise, she told herself, but no matter how hard she breathed, her chest demanded air.

Acidosis, she thought. Her oxygen was low and while her re-breather continued to filter CO_2, her lungs demanded more oxygen than they were getting. There were foothills on the horizon; she could probably reach them, short of breath or not. But was the orange door there, or kilometers east or west? They said she was expected; they did not say they would come get her.

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A pain shot through her abdomen and she remembered a curious fact from her training: acidosis could induce labor. She shivered and tried to keep up a steady pace and conserve her strength or she would give birth in her suit on the surface of the moon and mother and child would die in a spasm of pain. Where were the footsteps of the women who had come this way before?

A male voice with an accent like Beaumont's crackled in her ear, "Moonwalker! Moonwalker! This is rescue sled Delta Gamma Six. Do you read? We are flying a spiral search from your last location. Can you send a beacon? Talk to me, buddy. Do you read?"

The foothills approached and the un-nourishing air rasped in her lungs. Where were the mysterious women who would save her and her child? She saw them, bodies big as the hills, faces gray as the Moon. Their mouths moved but the sound they uttered was the shrill scream of the madonna's alarm. Their arms stretched out. Their fingers slid into her belly and reached for her child.

The pain shot through her lower abdomen, a contraction. This is where her body at last would betray her.

"Moonwalker, do you read?"

"Don't help me," she sobbed into her dead microphone. "Don't take me back."

Another spasm and the hills melted like cheese. The ground came up and struck her knee; her vision was obscured by sand. For a moment she was unconscious, then the sun swept over her and its light glowed through her eyelids, made her helmet expand with sharp ticking sounds. The third contraction made her cry out.

"Gimme a sign buddy and I'll get you home. People are waitin' for you. This is rescue sled Delta Gamma Six — "

Weakly, Marina reached with her right hand to her left wrist. She had failed Beaumont and she had failed herself. She slid back the safety and touched the red button. She had failed her child. Her helmet rang with the white noise of the emergency beacon.

"Beacon read! And ... fixed! We are locked on to your signal, moonwalker. Hang on, buddy, we're comin' to get you."

"You're awake," said a woman's voice. A round gray face leaned over Marina. "Do you speak Russian?"

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Marina moved her mouth, but words did not come out. "Take a sip of water," the voice said. A plastic tube touched Marina's lips. They were very dry and Marina sucked urgently. "I have a baby here from Spassky. Her mother's sedated. C-section," the woman said like she was sharing a secret. "It would be good form to quiet him in Russian, I think, even if he doesn't understand. We're big on development here."

Marina spat out the straw and said, "Where's Beaumont?"

"What?" said the voice.

"What time is it?" Marina's heart sank as she realized Beaumont was on shift.

"It's fifteen hundred." The woman had gray streaks in her smooth brown hair. She moved slowly and seemed incredibly calm. "Roland's not here, Marina."

"Beaumont. But where — ?"

"You're at Maculate Conception." The woman wore a yellow polo shirt and baggy jeans, not hospital scrubs. "It's a terrible name. We think of better ones all the time, but this one sticks."

"But the refuge — I never found the orange door. I pressed my beacon. I failed."

"We heard your signal and we came out to get you. We knew you were coming, but couldn't tell when you'd arrive. There's no orange door, of course. The company puts up with us, but they'd never let us have an orange door. That's just something to picture, something to give you the courage to keep coming into the mountains."

"The company knows about you? But why?"

"We're an R&D project. The company wants to know if it can switch to natural childbirth to save money in the long run. We have to maintain a plausible deniability, keep it from the stockholders, the government regulators, most of the employees, too. We can't have a beacon, either, but we can pick up yours." She looked at Marina. "Why did you say you failed?"

"The fetus — "

"Is fine."

"He's alive? But the pain? I had a baby and I didn't feel a thing."

"We used anesthetics; it was an emergency procedure." The woman looked at Marina. "It's not the pain that counts, Marina. It's what comes after. You have a beautiful baby girl. She's about a month early, but she's strong. When you hear her cry — "

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"Where is she?"

"Right there." The woman nodded toward the foot of the bed. "Where else would she be?" Weakly, Marina pushed herself up on her elbows, looked past the white hill of her knees and saw the crib.

"Can I—" Marina began, but then said firmly, "I want to hold my baby."

"Of course." The woman went to the crib and brought the child to her mother. "That's what she's for."

Marina took the tiny bundle of white cloth. The baby felt tiny in her arms, fragile, helpless. It was the first time Marina had ever held a baby and she was a little frightened. The thirty-four weeker weighed as much as a cat; her skin had a healthy pink glow. Marina looked into her dark eyes and saw Beaumont. She wanted to show him his daughter, and she hurt like she was being clenched in a huge fist because she could not. But she could almost hear his voice reminding her that every freedom has a price.

Marina called to the woman who was folding a sheet. "So we're free here, right?" she said. "Free of the company. Free?"

The woman thought a moment, then nodded her head and shrugged. "Sure," she said. "As free as anybody."

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Books

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

The Lions of Al-Rassan by Guy Gavriel Kay, HarperPrism, 510 pages, $20.00

The Tower of Beowulf by Parke Godwin, William Morrow, 256 pages, $22.00

IT'S BEEN some time since I found much of interest in the run of fantasy novels, the flood of work by the self-appointed heirs of J.R.R. Tolkien, the multi-volume epics full of dragons and wizards and elves and magic amulets. Don't get me wrong: I loved *The Lord of the Rings* as much as anyone else, and I devoured my share of imitations, looking for the same thrill, but after the first four or five derivative trilogies, I found I had lost my taste for ersatz medieval settings, second- or third-hand mythic influences, and less and less evocative prose. In the last few years it's gotten to the point where I've found more interesting "fantasy" novels published outside the genre than within.

But all along I've figured I must be missing something, that there must be some novels published as genre fantasy that bypass the enervated Tolkien tradition in favor of something a bit different, and I've discovered that I was right. Guy Gavriel Kay *is* doing something different, something that no other writer (to my knowledge) at the moment is attempting, and it's restored my faith in the possibilities of genre fantasy.

In *Tigana* (1990) and *A Song for Arbonne* (1992), Kay developed a unique hybrid of fantasy and historical fiction, in which he models a fantasy world more or less closely on recognizable historical places and times (in *Tigana* it was a vaguer blend of Arthurian elements with an atmosphere reminiscent of Renaissance Italy, and in *A Song for Arbonne* it was more specifically the culture of the Provençal troubadors). His latest, *The Lions of Al-Rassan*, carries this form further yet: Al-Rassan is quite clearly derived from the unformed Spain of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a land of minor kingdoms,

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some ruled by Islamic ("Asharite") princes and others by Christians ("Jaddites"); Kay's plot centers on the developing conflicts between the declining Asharite city-states and the rising Jaddite kingdoms of the north; one of his primary characters, Rodrigo Belmonte, bears unmistakable resemblance to the Spanish national hero El Cid. The "Kindath" are this world's Jews, even in their chosen colors (blue and white), their unquiet position as semi-citizens among both the Asharites and the Jaddites, and the pogroms that strike their settlements as extremist impulses drive the interfaith conflict to its inevitable head. But for a few details — this world, for example, like those of *Tigana* and *A Song for Arbonne*, has two moons — and for some significant compression of real historical events into a much shorter time frame, *The Lions of Al-Rassan* might almost be an historical novel. But it's not, and that (as Robert Frost might have it) makes all the difference.

I'm the kind of reader who finds inaccuracies in historical novels very irritating — they can make or break it for me. I'm not overzealous about it: I'm willing to forego strict accuracy in favor of a good story, much of the time; but when it seems that the author isn't aware of the errors, or has taken a cavalier attitude toward the issue of accuracy altogether, it puts me off. So from the start I found myself checking *The Lions of Al-Rassan* for accuracy: in the tone of the prose, the characterization of its people, the plausibility of its plot, and so forth. And I quickly realized that, by transferring the story to a fantasy world, however closely modeled on an historical reality, Kay was blunting the edge of my nitpicker's sword. What is "accurate" in a world that never existed?

For instance, the character of Jehane, a female Kindath physician, might have bothered me in a purely historical novel: she brings a very modern attitude to bear in most of her dealings — she's fiercely independent, uncowed in the presence of male power, free to travel nearly alone from city to city, and so on. Not an impossibility in the 11th or 12th century, but it would take a lot more work to make her convincing in an historical context. Here, in Al-Rassan, I'm more willing to suspend my disbelief, give Kay the benefit of the doubt, go with the flow. In some cases, Kay uses this greater leeway for some delightful touches: at one point, a servant offers hot drinks of chocolate — which in our world would not have been available in the 12th century (brought back as it was from Mexico in the 16th); here it *feels*

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right, and we're very willing to smile and grant Kay the anachronism, grateful that the fantasy setting makes such an element possible. Similarly, one exchange among Rodrigo Belmonte, Ammar ibn Khairan (the Asharite hero), and Jehane has all the élan and humor of a good 1940s comedy, something with Cary Grant, and though that would hardly fit in a real medieval setting, it's too much fun to wish it gone from Al-Rassan. But there are also times when Kay lets himself carry the implausibilities too far, such as when, early on, he introduces us to a camp of prostitutes outside the walls of Jehane's city, telling us that Jehane finds them "better company than almost anyone she knew in the city." The cliché of the virtuous whores is so creaky as to be laughable, and for the plot's purposes they need not be so romanticized; they could have been pleasantly rough-edged, grittier and maybe a little meaner, and the scene could have gone along just as well.

One of the pleasures of historical fiction is the opportunity it offers to expose ourselves to different cultural perspectives and value systems, and that's something that Kay loses for the most part in his fantasy world, choosing instead to introduce a much more contemporary viewpoint into his story. Jehane isn't the only character who seems more modern than medieval here. The contemporary outlook also leads to some trouble with the tone of Kay's prose — on the very first page, in an otherwise beautifully written opening scene, he says of some guards: "They had been dealt with," a line with a distinctly contemporary feel. Such sour notes intrude not often, but consistently; one character later on says, "'I guess it was a dream,'" and Kay writes, "It occurred to Jehane just about then," and so on. Most of the time Kay has the tone down well, but every now and then his ear is a little off.

And yet, for all the liberties he takes and for the occasional irritating intrusion of contemporaneity, *The Lions of Al-Rassan* also features some lovely scenes that accurately evoke the feel and character of the medieval world. At one point one of the Jaddite rulers, King Ramiro, must resolve a bitter conflict between Rodrigo and the scion of another clan, and he uses the opportunity to gather to himself and the monarchy some powers not previously identified with the office; he's in the process of converting his role from that of petty warlord to that of stately monarch, and he's using all the methods that actual kings of the 11th and 12th century were using, including a reliance on written law and formal court hearings, general

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taxation, building projects, and so forth. The scene is a wonderful depiction of that process, both in the imaginary Al-Rassan and in our own world. On a smaller level, at another point, we see the characteristic mangling of Arabic (Asharite) names in the mouths of Europeans (Jaddites): they pronounce the name "ibn Musa" as "Abenmuza," just as in our world Europeans turned the name of the famous Muslim scholar ibn Sina into "Avicenna," as he is still known in the West today.

Of course there's more to *The Lions of Al-Rassan* than questions of historical fidelity. Kay spins a truly exciting and intriguing story from his real and fantastical elements, and the historical resonances add texture and depth to the work without ever intruding too strongly for the tale to keep moving. We view events through the perspectives of several characters, mainly Rodrigo, Ammar, Jehane, and one of Rodrigo's soldiers, Alvar, but we also dip into the thoughts of King Ramiro, the Asharite prince Amalik II, the Muwardi chieftain Yazir ibn Q'arif, and several others along the way. Kay handles these multiple viewpoints skilfully, and uses them well to add complexity to the world and the plot. During a

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particularly bloody battle scene, for instance, we view events through the eyes of young Alvar, who's trying to adapt his romantic notions to the realities of combat; those of Jehane, who's used as part of a trap; those of Count Nino di Carrera, a Jaddite nobleman whose forces are ambushed; and those of Idar ibn Tarif, one of the sons of the bandit chief orchestrating the raid. Though Alvar and Jehane command our greatest attention and sympathy, Kay portrays each view with compassion, and prevents the scene from ever resolving into a good vs. evil simplicity — we feel something for all the combatants, feel the tragedy of the situation that has brought them all into conflict, wish for a more peaceful solution. Throughout the book Kay is careful to portray violence and its repercussions with a realistic eye; there are no disposable people here, fodder for the swords of the heroes. Jehane muses: "perhaps Rodrigo was good at what he did because he knew the price exacted by the deeds of soldiers at war?" Kay never lets us forget that price, and this elevates *The Lions of Al-Rassan* above the level of the many more childish fantasies in which the dead don't bleed and the living don't grieve.

There are times, however, when Kay's narrative techniques become too obvious, the author's hand too visible, and we feel manipulated rather than intrigued. One ploy he's overly fond of involves withholding information from the reader longer than might seem natural, in order to heighten the suspense and the surprise — who is it that lies dead in the street? what happened to Jehane's father to shock him into years of silence? and so on. Too often this technique becomes more manipulative than entertaining, and we wish he'd just spill the beans and get on with things. But other times Kay's narrative ploys work very effectively: for instance, at one point he builds up to a show-duel between Rodrigo and Ammar on one side and five men on the other, and though the experience of fighting side-by-side has a powerful effect on the men, binding them with an almost mystical mutual respect, and has repercussions echoing throughout the rest of the book, Kay never actually shows us the battle. He leaves it off-stage, allowing us to glean what we know of it from scattered offhand references thereafter, and here it works as well as any magician's misdirection — by so conspicuously leaving the action out, Kay draws the reader's attention all the more strongly to the event, perhaps more effectively than he ever could have done by showing it entire.

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(It's also true that Kay seems much more interested in and comfortable with verbal duels than swordplay; he's exceedingly adept at staging taut verbal exchanges, from courtly politicking to flirtatious innuendo, so perhaps he's chosen to play his strength in this case, as well.)

One final benefit Kay gets by adopting a fantasy setting rather than a strictly historical one is that we don't know how the story will turn out in the end. In a typical historical novel — Judith Tarr's *Lord of the Two Lands*, for instance — we know what's going to happen, at least on the largest scale: we know Alexander the Great is going to die young, we know the North will beat the South, we know the Nazis will lose. Though in our world the Christians ended up evicting the Muslims and the Jews from Spain by the end of the 15th century, in Al-Rassan we can't be so sure of the outcome, and this adds another dimension of poignance to Kay's tale: we can entertain a faint hope that in this world another solution will be found, and people with differences (be they religious, political, or otherwise) can find a way to coexist. As holy war looms, we can still pray for deliverance.

And that, I think, is the secret of Kay's success. Whenever it seems he's taking the story in a particular direction — when he's adopting a scenario that seems like a cliché, or twisting the plot in what looks like a predictable direction — often enough he carries it off in another direction altogether, surprising us, and making *The Lions of Al-Rassan* not only more engaging to read, but more complex and thoughtful as well. If this were all he gained from transferring his action to a fantasy world, that would be excuse enough. As it is, he makes much more of it than that, and delivers a distinctive fantasy novel that is certainly not just the same old thing.

On the face of it, Parke Godwin's latest novel, *The Tower of Beowulf*, might seem a different sort of undertaking — Godwin bases his novel very closely on one particular source, the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, and sets his retelling in an historical period in our own world (roughly the 5th or 6th century) — but in fact Godwin pursues many of the same goals as Kay, and with a surprising number of similarities.

Godwin mainly follows the original poem's structure, seeing Beowulf through his battle with the monster Grendel, with Grendel's lake-dwelling mother, and finally with a hoard-guarding dragon Beowulf meets in his old age, but Godwin weaves his

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own inventions and interpretation of the poem into the spaces the original leaves vacant. For instance, in Godwin's version Beowulf began his career with a disastrous raid on the neighboring Frisians; most of the warband were killed, and Beowulf only escaped by running. He's never told anyone, but the shame of that cowardice has haunted him ever since, driving him on to greater and greater acts of heroism in order to expunge the memory. Godwin also fleshes out the character of the one other member of Beowulf's band named in the poem, Hondshew, making him Beowulf's best friend and an example of someone who has resisted the imperatives of his heroic culture in favor of the quieter pleasures of home and family. And where the poem leaves Beowulf's life between his fight with Grendel's mother and his fight with the dragon almost entirely undescribed, Godwin takes advantage of the gap to develop Beowulf's character further, to show him maturing into a more settled and contented older man.

In one sense, since Godwin sets his tale in our world's real past, *The Tower of Beowulf* is more vulnerable to criticisms of accuracy — by and large Godwin handles his historical material very well, though a few irritating discrepancies crop up here and there, particularly in the sections where Godwin departs most widely from his source. (Early on, in describing the Norse god Loki, who figures into the conception of Grendel's mother, Godwin has him lamenting petulantly that Asgard is too "'balanced and *boring*'" for his tastes; it's a strikingly contemporary treatment of the god's personality, quite jarring, but thankfully there are few such moments.) On the other hand, Godwin has chosen a time period and an heroic figure much less well documented than Kay's; we know a whole lot more about the Europe of the 11th and 12th centuries than we do about the 5th and 6th, so there's a lot more detail for Kay to keep straight, even in his fantasy world doppelgänger.

Oddly, though Kay sets his tale in an imaginary landscape, it's Godwin who tosses more fantastic elements into his historical mix. Where Kay keeps things on a naturalistic level — there are no monsters or godlings stalking the land of Al-Rassan — Godwin gives us tangible gods and giants, the monstrous Grendel and his mother Sigyn, magic and a dragon. Still, Godwin does an admirable job in evoking the mood and worldview of his time period — in many places he draws on the vocabulary and diction of the poem

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itself (such terms as "whale-road" for the sea, references to "mead-benches" and "mead-halls," and so forth), and even in the scenes he's invented himself, he illuminates the rather alien culture from which the poem sprang. "'Nothing lasts but honor,'" says the young Beowulf to his crew, "'so let's try the impossible while some remains.'" *The Tower of Beowulf* has the historical dimension that *The Lions of Al-Rassan* lacks: encountering Beowulf and his peers, we're getting a taste of a very different culture from our own, and ours does not always seem the better.

Like Kay, Godwin relates his story through a wide range of viewpoints—we get scenes through Loki's eyes, and Sigyn's, and the Danish king Hrothgar's, and others' — and he uses these various perspectives to produce a more intricate and multifaceted narrative; with many viewpoints, we cannot fall back on the easy good-and-evil dichotomy of the poem, but are forced to recognize the intrinsic humanity in all the characters. We see Grendel's battle with Beowulf from both of their perspectives, and listen as Grendel laments to his mother about the man who injured him: "'Not a man but a thing. A monster,'" echoing the terms in which the men of Heorot have spoken of Grendel himself. Indeed, after the battle it is Beowulf who seems in some ways the more monstrous — Grendel and Sigyn are full of human feeling, grief and pain, but Beowulf, tortured by his inner guilt, appears emotionally vacant: "Beowulf was as horrified as the others, but at such a *distance*. How gullibly men hailed as heroism what was merely a lack of life." After he tracks Sigyn to her lake home and kills her there, Beowulf sees the monstrousness of his own situation; in the years that follow he comes to see Grendel and his mother as people rather than monsters, and feels for them. "'They were like fish

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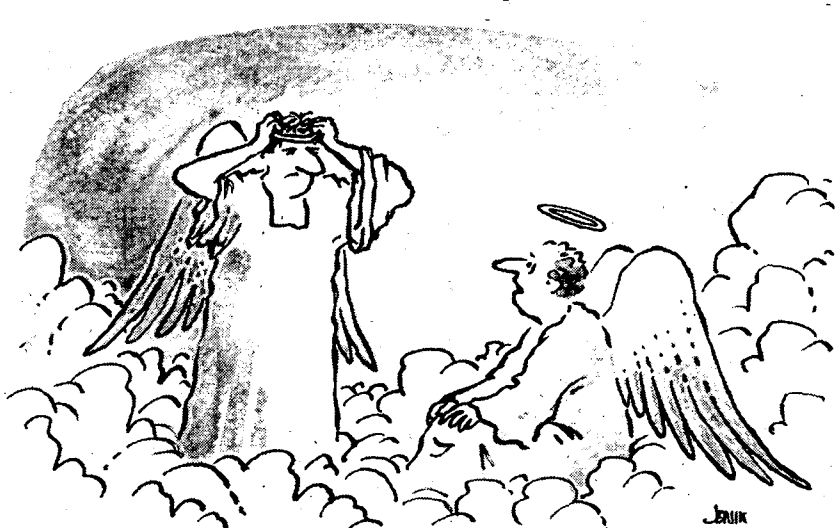
in a reed trap,'" he tells Hondshew's young daughter, "'that's all, fish in a trap. Still in water, but caught.'" Even when Beowulf confronts the dragon, we are denied the typical sympathies of such fantasy battles: we have looked through the dragon's eyes, and we've learned something of its motives ("None were more afraid than the dragon itself"), and we can't see it as merely a monster anymore.

It's in this greater complexity, this avoidance of the oversimplified structures of most fantasy novels, that Kay's and Godwin's novels are most alike. Both of them find in the realities of an historical context the inevitable multifariousness of real human experience, and they invigorate their fantasies with that insight. Reading *The Lions of Al-Rassan* and *The Tower of Beowulf*, we have to wonder if we should ever be satisified with another one-dimensional evil wizard, another acid-dripping fire-breathing dragon, another saintly hero, or if we ought instead to demand better of all our fantasies, and insist that they reflect more of the true complexity of our own lives.



"One of the first things you have to learn is not to get up so fast."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Expiration Date, by Tim Powers, HarperCollins UK, 1995, 616 pages, £5.99, Mass market

AFTER exploring the vampiric muses of Victorian poets, special brews of dark ale that have remarkable properties, the Fisher King as a gangster in Las Vegas, and other imaginatively madcap subjects, Tim Powers turns to something a bit more mundane with his newest novel: Ghosts. Of course it's a Powers take on ghosts, so anything you might know on the subject should immediately be thrown out the window because you won't find much familiar ground here.

First of all, Powers's ghosts don't haunt so much as provide sustenance for a certain segment of society, who consider their vintage and vitality with the same discerning palette as a connoisseur of fine wine does a new beverage. It gives a whole new meaning to the idea of ghostbusting. You'll also be introduced to the idea that many of the homeless people seen on the streets of L.A. are actually ghosts that have managed to accrue some semblance of physical shape as trash and other debris is collected about them. Then there are the people who have died, but don't quite realize it, so they continue to inhabit their bodies. Or how about the ones that do realize it, and have to go to extraordinary lengths to preserve their bodies?

Expiration Date is a fascinating take on a segment of the supernatural that's literally (pardon me) been done to death. A lot of it centers around the ghost of Thomas Edison, such a tasty and well-aged vintage that everyone seems to want him. There are also chapter epigraphs taken from Lewis Carroll that beg comparisons to the Alice books. The plot moves at a helter-skelter pace, jumping here, there and everywhere, and features as quirky a cast as you're likely to meet this side of a mental institution's walls.

In other words, it's a Powers novel, which means it'll have you

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turning pages as much for his sheer inventiveness as for the plot, and leave you viewing the world far differently from how you did when you first dipped into its pages.

I've come to realize that one doesn't really read Powers for his characterization—his characters are drawn with too broad a brush to be believable, or in many cases, to be taken all that seriously, although they certainly take themselves very seriously indeed. Nor is the story of the utmost importance, careening as it does from incident to incident. Instead, it's for the remarkable frisson that sparks from the page, the playfulness of the language, the sheer absurdity of much of what takes place, and the undercurrent of seriousness that keeps the work from sailing off into common buffoonery.

For amid all the razzle-dazzle taking place "on stage" in this book, Powers also attempts to explore and convey ideas about the responsibility we have for our actions. How we can run from the past, but in the end, we can't avoid it. How as much goes on below the surface (in a city, in a human being, even in a ghost) as upon it, and that hidden landscape is what really propels the stories of our lives.

Balancing all of this is a neat trick, if you can pull it off. In *Expiration Date*, Powers does.

Practical Magic, by Alice Hoffman, Putnam, 1995, 244 pages, $22.95, Hardcover

There's nothing quite so comforting as finding a new book by a favorite author waiting for you in the bookstore. (Unless it's a heretofore unknown book by said author that you stumble across by some happy accident, but that's another story.) Alice Hoffman is one such author for me as those of you with long memories might remember since I discussed her novel *Turtle Moon* (1992) in my first installment of this column.

Turtle Moon was a sort of magical realist mystery/ghost story. She followed that with last year's *Second Nature*, her own take on the "feral child" story where an infant is taken in by wild animals (in this case wolves) and raised by them in the wild. This time out she has set her sights on witches and the "practical magic" we more normally associate with old wives' tales and superstition.

Our cast is mostly composed of three generations of the Owens women: the aunts who remain ciphers until the end of the book; sisters Gillian and Sally, the former is wild and quickly flees her strange upbringing through a series of bad marriages and affairs, the latter also flees, but she does so to find a normal

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life in suburbia; and Sally's daughters, Antonia and Kylie.

The first part of the book deals with Gillian and Sally growing up in the aunts' house. I can't quite put my finger on why, but in some ways, it's the least appealing part — mostly because there's something in Hoffman's style at this point of the story that distances the readers from the characters. Too much telling us how things are, rather than trusting her writing to show us why the characters react to situations as they do and what motivates them to flee the house.

But this is only the first forty pages or so and the greater part of the novel retains Hoffman's usual warm prose, insightful characterization and whimsical sense of incident and plot. Things heat up when, after not seeing each other for eighteen years, Gillian shows up on Sally's doorstep with a dead man in her car — her abusive boyfriend Jimmy, killed by Gillian while she was trying to tame the nasty side of his nature through small doses of nightshade.

Whatever differences the sisters might have, Sally can't turn Gillian away. They bury Jimmy's body under the lilac bushes in the back yard and try to continue on with their lives. But now everything's changed. The presence of the corpse makes the lilacs bloom long into summer and soon Jimmy makes his presence felt in other, unpleasant ways. The sisters begin to bicker and tension runs high in the household, particularly since Sally's daughters are bringing their own problems to the equation: Antonia's sudden drop in popularity makes her miserable while Kylie is just entering puberty and anyone with children or good memories knows what kind of a spin that can put on an already tense household. And I haven't even gotten into all the small magics and the like that wind their way through the story.

How things work out you'll have to find out for yourself...and I hope you do, if only to introduce yourself to Hoffman's work. Her prose is by turns charmingly whimsical and darkly sensual, while her sense of the pitfalls and joys of human relationships — those we form with ourselves as much as with others — and her ability to convey them to her readers is matchless.

Practical Magic is her eleventh novel to date and frankly she has yet to write a bad book; each one seems more inspired than the one preceding it. She's not writing big stories. The world isn't in peril, the universe goes on, no matter what happens to her characters. But she invests such insight and truthfulness in her writing that the stories gain weight the same

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way the small incidents in our own lives often overshadow the larger concerns of the world around us.

Pentacle, by Tom Piccirilli, Pirate Writings Publishing, 1995, 124 pages, $5.99, Paperback

This collection by Tom Piccirilli heralds the arrival of another new publisher in the field. Pirate Writings Publishing already produces a fine magazine, *Pirate Writings*, but now they're moving into books as well and their first effort is promising: a mass market-sized book, printed on good stock with a pen & ink cover and interior pencil illustrations by Keith Minnion. The latter reproduce a little fuzzily — and someone should tell their copy editor that story titles are usually enclosed by double quotation marks, rather than underlined—but otherwise the book is nicely designed.

The stories themselves center around a nameless sorcerer and his demonic familiar "Self" as they wander contemporary America, encountering mischief and mayhem, and delivering — albeit often reluctantly — the same. I wasn't familiar with Piccirilli's work before beginning this book and was delighted with the assurance of his prose and imagery. The stories abound with startling and emotive incidents — Cotton Mather doomed to forever drive a schoolbus of dead children because "he'd worked too much evil in the name of God, and too much good in his righteous convictions to join the Devil. Now, he simply drove." Or Native spirits Coyote and Massau, the Skeleton Man, courting Adam's first wife Lilith with disastrous results.

Unfortunately, Piccirilli falters when it comes to ending the stories. Most of them resolve with some form of *deus ex machina*, rather than having the conclusion growing out of the story's events, and the reader feels cheated. It's a flaw many newer writers need to overcome and perhaps Piccirilli's already working on it, since the last, and longest, story in the collection hangs together all the way to its conclusion.

What's most fascinating about Piccirilli's work is how successfully he has translated a true sense of the Gothic into very contemporary settings, and his use of angels and demons, as well as mythic figures from other cultures, to create a "melting pot" as diverse as the American landscape and psyche he's exploring in these stories.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Robert Reed is having quite a year. His novel, Beyond the Veil of Stars, *made the* New York Review of Science Fiction*'s Year's Best List. He has had several stories in* F&SF *and* Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, *and his last story for us inspired our September cover.*

He returns with a tale of computers, viruses, and the ways that the little things change our lives.

The Myrtle Man

By Robert Reed

HE HAD A PLEASANT FACE, in a reliable, unhandsome way, and his warm brown eyes and easy smile made Amy want to believe the best in him. His name was Jacob Turnbull, the crisp brown uniform and two IDs proving that he came from the library dealership. Gazing at the camera above the sealed front door, he said, "You have myrtle problems, as I understand it." He lowered his passport, then brightened his smile. "Something about John Wayne riding into battle on a fire-breathing dragon. Is that right, Ms. Taylor?"

"Oh," she exclaimed, "it's a lot more than that."

Referring to the reader on his belt, he laughed and said, "And something about the shape of the world, too."

"It's round," she blurted.

"Yes, ma'am. I know."

Amy said, "But my son doesn't. Our library taught him it's like an apple. You know, with holes at both ends."

"It's a common myrtle, ma'am."

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"Can you help me?" Did she sound anxious? Vulnerable? Or just crazy?

Crazy would be the worst, she believed. "I don't dare let him read or watch anything. I mean, he's a boy. He doesn't understand — "

"Yes, ma'am."

"The library is lying to him!"

"Ms. Taylor," he said, "I want to help. But first, I need to examine your equipment and determine the extent of your trouble."

"'A purge and refill job.' That's what I was told to expect."

"Eventually, yes." He sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "But first I need to check the hardware, then I'll have to protect all the files that belong to you and your family. A general purge would erase them."

She said, "Fine."

She said, "I understand," without meaning it. A long truck was parked at the curb, and she focused on its license, jotting down the number because she didn't trust her library to record this critical detail. Then she touched a button, saying, "Come in," as the door unsealed with a menacing *kla-chunk*.

These were clever, malicious times.

What if she'd just invited a thief into her home?

Yet Mr. Tumbull didn't appear the least bit criminal. Looking nowhere but at her, his eyes showed nothing but a bloodless, professional interest. And she still couldn't relax, blurting out, "My husband's going to be home soon. Maybe any minute."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you need me to show you the library?"

The face only hinted at amusement. "It would help, yes."

Then from behind: "Mom? Who is it?"

Harry came charging out of the basement. Her son was wearing shorts and an unflattering mesh shirt, and he was sweating, a large orange ball in his hands and his breathing damp and fast. In a secret way, she was glad the library was broken. Her son needed this exercise. She knew it as surely as she knew she should do it too, but then again, he was young enough to change his ways. A vigorous game in the playroom was a good thing. Harry had inherited her fat-hoarding genes, and that was just another thing to make her lie awake in fear.

"You're the myrtle man," said Harry.

"I am," the invader confessed.

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Amy motioned. "It's just upstairs." She took the first few stairs, then paused and looked over her shoulder.

"I'm following," the myrtle man promised. "Lead on."

"So where's your cable?" asked Harry, something suspicious in the tone. "You're supposed to bring in a glass cable, and stuff."

– "I will. My stuff's in my truck."

Harry waited for an instant, then said, "I found the myrtles."

"Did you?"

"Well, a bunch of them."

"So," the man asked, "what's the shape of the world?"

"Round," Harry replied, almost growling. "That's what Mom says."

Amy hesitated on the top stair, remaining silent.

"It is round. How can it be anything else?" The myrtle man laughed, then asked, "What's your name?"

"Harry. What's yours?"

"Jacob. "

"It says Jacob on your shirt," Harry observed.

"Very astute."

"What's astute mean?" He shouted up at his mother, "Can I look up '*a-stute*'?"

She said, "No."

"Why not?"

She entered the library, suddenly angry. "Because it's lying to us, Harry. Didn't I tell you?"

Jacob seemed oblivious of them. Walking into the little room, he stopped and turned in a slow, observant circle, saying, "Oh, this is a fine one. A beautiful old Universal, isn't it?"

She couldn't say.

"A Universal 8. No, it's the 9."

"Is it?"

"Twenty years old, if it's a nanosecond." Jacob began to stroke the bindings of the false books, then pulled on one as if to test its falseness. No, it was rooted in place. It and the others were camouflage for the machinery set within, the sum total of human knowledge — every published word and painting, video and photograph, plus every recorded musical and dramatic performance — existed in a digital form, literally at their fingertips.

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As were the damned myrtles, too.

"The library came with the house," said Amy, as if to apologize for its age. "We thought about buying a new one — "

"Don't," Jacob interrupted.

She hesitated.

Grinning, he said, "The new ones are smaller, and faster too. I know." Another stroke of the bindings. He had long hands, she noticed. Kind hands, perhaps. "If you're worried about running low on capacity, buy Universal Add-Ons. Another shelf or two would double your space, and you'd keep this ambiance."

"Mom," said Harry, "what's ambiance?"

There was a reader in one corner — the most unused reader in the house. Jacob sat, adjusting the chair to fit his lanky frame. Then he activated the library, asking, "What was your first sign of trouble?"

Amy beat Harry to the answer. "The cowboy on the dragon."

Jacob laughed in a gentle, knowing way. "You know, my grandfather loved John Wayne. He would have hated that myrtle." On the view screen, in perfect color but without sound, a one-eyed actor rode across a mountain meadow on the back of a golden dragon. "If you ask me, the best myrtles are the subtle ones. The ones we don't suspect."

A "best" myrtle? She doubted there was such a thing, but she wanted to appear interested. "What subtle ones?"

"Well, like with this cowboy. Back when the first libraries came on the market, some of the actor's fans managed to insert a lot of modest changes into them. Some fans removed his weight. Others made him look younger, more idealized. But what really matters, and what's hardest to spot and remove, are the doctorings that made him a better actor. Someone gave him more feeling, a better sense of timing. Things more subtle than subtle, if you know what I mean."

Not particularly, no.

Jacob glanced up at her, shrugging. "Nine out of ten libraries, if they haven't been thoroughly demyrtled, carry the new and improved John Wayne. People who watch don't know better, and why should they? We get better movies as a consequence."

On the screen, in vivid orange and red, the dragon spit up a ball of fire, incinerating the bad men and setting an entire mountainside ablaze.

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"That's my favorite part," said Harry, with conviction.

"Tell you what." Jacob winked at the boy. "I'll save it for you. We'll make a special category and keep it, and you can watch it whenever you want."

"Great," the boy squealed, jumping until his belly jiggled.

"Honey," said his mother, "why don't we leave Mr. Turnbull alone? He'll call us when everything's fixed."

"I don't want to go," Harry admitted. "Jacob? Will you save me all the good stuff?"

With a mixture of charm and inviolable authority, the myrtle man shook a finger, remarking, "The best stuff is always saved, Harry. When you're older you'll see what I mean."

AFTER A LOT of complaining, Harry left them, exiled to the basement. But despite her own pledge to leave the myrtle man alone, Amy lingered in the doorway, watching him work while telling herself that she wasn't suspicious or unfair. Libraries were important appliances. She kept telling herself that it was time to learn about the damned things.

"Do you know where 'myrtle' comes from?"

She blinked her eyes several times. "Pardon me?"

"The term. The concept." Jacob was squatting on padded knees, an incomprehensible tool in one hand, a dusty component in the other. "Back in ancient times, even before this 9 was built, a top library designer gave a speech about creative viruses and sophisticated forgeries. She likened them to lies told by the software that computers, gullible and possessing perfect memories, would believe without hesitation. Without end." What was he saying? She waited, unsure what to think.

"In the speech she told a story about her Aunt Myrtle — have you heard it, ma'am? — who would leave her house lights burning all day and all night. And why? Because when Myrtle was a little girl she was told that most of the cost of any light came when it was turned on. It only stood to reason that if you never turned the light off, you saved money and energy in the long run. Right?"

Amy could believe Myrtle's logic. But then again, she had no feel for technological questions, deciding just to nod and say, "I guess so."

"For a while," said Jacob, "we called them aunt myrtles."

"Who?"

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"The untruths accepted by the libraries. But somewhere along the line, the 'aunt' was dropped."

Amy was a teenage girl when libraries became cheap enough to afford and yet rare enough to appeal to snobs. The attraction of the machines was genuine enough. To be able to say, "I own the sum total of human experience," was always an impressive statement.

Jacob said, "They're called myrtles, and most of the human race knows what the word means. The fictions that our machines believe to be truths, and because we believe our machines, we can be fooled, too. I mean, what choice do we have?"

She considered her myrtles. The worst of them, she believed, were a lot more dangerous than leaving the lights burning all night. After a cleansing deep breath, she confessed, "Harry has found other things, too."

"Kids do, ma'am."

"There's not a planet on the other side of the sun, is there? One just like Earth?"

"No. No, there isn't."

"I knew that." She took another breath. "I mean, Harry loves science. I don't know why, neither of his parents do. But he does, and I let him study what he wants, just so long as he finishes his tutor's assignments." A pause. "He's being educated at home."

"I know. Here's your AI." He patted the shell of an old dictionary. "It's a popular model. Very strict."

"It showed Harry a map of the solar system, and there was this second earth hidden by the sun." She hesitated, reading something in the man's expression. "What's wrong?"

"That AI wouldn't be fooled by such a big myrtle. When it accesses maps of the solar system, it accesses thousands of them, ignoring the odd ones." He paused, giving a charming little wink. "The boy found it on his own, I bet. While exploring."

"I see."

"And you're probably asking: Why find that one out of the millions of available maps? Because these myrtles are aggressive. The most aggressive ones spread fastest and always put themselves where they can be noticed." An expansive shrug. "Why invent an elaborate myrtle just to keep it a deep, deep secret?"

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She could understand his rationale.

"On this other earth," asked Jacob, "are the people left-handed?"

"I think so. Yes. "

"Oh, that's an enormous myrtle." He blew the dust from several components, then slipped them into his shirt pocket. "You can access a history of that world, build a globe of it, even find census figures and photographs taken from every spot on its surface. In a lot of ways, frankly, it's a lovely place."

"It doesn't exist," she complained.

"Outside a string of zeros and ones, no. You are right, ma'am."

"Harry says that the dinosaurs killed themselves with H-bombs. That's a myrtle."

"I hope so," said Jacob, grinning.

She watched as he opened a service port, then said, "I believe in home educations."

"Many do."

A pause, then she asked, "Do you have children?"

"Yeah. Two. "

"Do you have a tutor for them?"

"In part. But they go to public school in the afternoons. My ex-wife and I decided that was best." He almost glanced at her, then used a tiny vacuum cleaner to pull dust out of the port. "I guess it's for the social skills, and to keep them out of my ex's hair."

Amy didn't mention her feelings about public school, but she suspected they showed on her face and in the wringing of her hands.

"I could, if you want, purge and replace the science files."

She said nothing.

"But usually, particularly with an old Universal, there'll be a lot of myrtles. All kinds." He fastened a jeweled device to the port, then rose and punched commands into the reader's keyboard. "Every nanosecond of every day, you've got new information arriving. New zeros and ones. There's always that chance in some of them being myrtles."

"I know," she replied, in disgust.

Numbers, tiny and compacted, appeared on the full screen.

Amy said, "We bought filters to keep them out. I don't remember when. A couple years ago, I think."

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"Five years ago, I think." Jacob gave a wise shrug. "I saw them, ma'am."

"Well," she groaned, "aren't they working?"

"Honestly? They weren't the best skeptics available even five years ago." A slow sigh. "Average modern skeptics would do better."

That's right, they weren't called filters. She remembered being rather offended by the idea of mechanical agents watching what entered their library, knowing better than her what was genuine. And now she braced herself, ready for the sales pitch, this man counting on her ignorance and fears to sell her the very best at an inflated price.

Except Jacob made no such offer. Instead he asked, "Have you or your husband noticed other myrtles?"

Her husband? It took Amy a moment to remember her fib about *him* coming home at any moment.

"Any other myrtles, ma'am?"

"Well," she began, "I like reading mysteries. Quite a lot, really. And I've been noticing some that sound new, but their authors have been dead for years."

"They're new books, probably."

"I thought so."

"It's true with a lot of authors. Big ones, little ones." Jacob paused, studying a stream of senseless numbers. "Fans write them and slip them into the Net traffic. With the right camouflage, a poor home library doesn't know better."

She said nothing.

"Or sometimes, fans improve a classic. Or at least try." He touched buttons, fingers blurring. "What else have you noticed?"

"Well," she said. And hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I like paintings. Landscapes. I put them on the big screens in my favorite rooms — "

"Your living room walls are blank, I noticed."

"It was suppose to be a Monet, and it looked like his style." She was sorry to have begun this confession, but the weight of it was irresistible. "The painting was...it seemed...pornographic...."

"Ah!" he exclaimed. The long fingers tapped at the screen's glass, then he turned to report, "This isn't a prime number. It only looks prime."

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She couldn't count the digits beneath his hands.

"Something slipped it into math text. As a joke, probably."

A joke?

"AIs, ma'am. They've got their own sense of humor." He shrugged and blanked the screen. "AIs are a different kettle of guppies. In old times, myrtles were human-made. But nowadays, with all these advanced programs and their hardware linked to the Net, with all this imagination to burn.... Well, a lot of myrtles come from bored AIs."

Amy felt an enormous, imprecise fear. In an effort to sound strong, she said, "I don't like lies. In fact, I hate them."

"Good for you."

She approached her library, fingers touching the plastic bindings that showed, despite twenty years of existence, no trace of wear. The bindings were lies, she supposed, but not wicked or ugly ones. She willed herself not to see the irony.

"This is a guess, but it looks as if you haven't had a purge in ten years." Jacob reclaimed his jeweled device. "If I may ask, how long have you and your husband lived here?"

"Seven years." The blame wasn't all theirs.

Jacob punched numbers into his own little reader, then with a steady professional voice informed her, "I can do a complete purge, then a restandardization. If you wish. This is the cost, including labor and parts, and taxes too. The total is on the bottom."

Amy couldn't read the numbers. Stress made them swirl, and she had to squint and concentrate, even then needing to read them twice.

"I can do it today. If you want."

Had the myrtle man said something? She wasn't sure.

"I can do cheaper, stopgap work, but your library is begging for maintenance. I'm sorry, ma'am."

She had failed, and not for the first time. If pressed, she would break down now, confessing to a string of private failures.

"Ma'am? Are you all right?"

Almost without breath, she asked, "May I make a call?"

"Naturally."

"To my husband, I mean."

Jacob touched her on the shoulder, very lightly, and with a voice both

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sympathetic and strong, he said, "Take your time, Ms. Taylor. I'll wait, and you take all the time you need."

THE INSTANT Amy saw the expected face, she launched into a harsh summary of her morning, losing momentum only when the face grinned, a soothing voice saying, "Take it easy, little lady."

It wasn't Dan; it was his goddamn answering program.

"I want to talk to him," she warned. "Now. This minute."

The image — tanned, rested, flattering — gave a big grin before saying, "He's occupied just now, darling."

"Well," she replied, "tell him to pull his dick out and call me. And I mean soon."

The grin persisted, the image of a sunny apartment behind it, out of focus in the stylish way that was now fashionable. "I'll deliver your message, little lady. Is there anything else?"

She blanked the screen, stood and froze in place. When it came to her husband, Amy had a simple rule: He won't make me cry with his first shot. And she managed to remain dry-eyed and sober, opening her bedroom door and walking to the library, finding Jacob sitting at the reader, conspicuously doing nothing.

He glanced at her face, eyes asking what he should do.

"You can start," she muttered, wondering how she looked to him. Under stress, no doubt. Probably frail. A chubby, exhausted woman whose husband had abandoned her for women ten years her junior, all lean and well-rested. "What will you do? Pull your cable up from your truck?"

"Eventually. If you're willing, that is."

A nod. Brief, crisp.

"If you do change your mind," he offered, "we can downgrade my work. If it's soon enough."

Jacob seemed like a very nice man, she was thinking. All men, in some private teflon-lined part of themselves, were the most decent people. It was a lesson she couldn't learn often enough; and with a wave of her hand, she told him, "Do whatever you need. Clean everything. Put in skeptics. I don't care."

Harry helped the myrtle man.

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Despite his mother's wishes, and her fears, the boy touched the fancy tools and kept very much underfoot, asking large questions while he pretended to be the assistant. Amy wanted to work; she made extra money fashioning clay pots by hand; some people were willing to pay for good craftwork. But she didn't want to leave the two boys alone. Alert as a security camera, she watched Harry tug at the plastic-coated cable, giggling at some private little joke. Walking past her, humming as he played, he said, "We're going to empty the library, Mom. Get a bucket. A big, big bucket."

Everyone was laughing.

Shaking her head, she said, "I know better," and closed the front door as far as possible, the cable unwilling to dent.

Jacob said, "Ms. Taylor? I need to make sure what's yours."

Of course. They went back upstairs, and she discovered that he had already arranged the files between private and public realms. What was public was enormous — the earth next to a grain of sand — yet on the reader it seemed perfectly balanced with her house records and Harry's accounts and the rest of it. Jacob told Harry, "I put your cowboy on the dragon in here. It's with your own digital designs."

"What about the other stuff?"

"Tell me what you want."

Harry rattled on about the left-handed earth, the one he still partway believed in despite his old mother's denials. With an expertness that startled her, he put up images of blue surf and bluer seagulls, describing this tropical beach as if he was its discoverer.

The reader emitted a quiet musical tone.

"Dan calling. Line one."

Amy retreated, apparently unnoticed. Again in her bedroom, the door closed and her sitting on the bed, she put the call on the full screen, then snapped, "You'll be getting a bill."

Dan looked tired, though certainly for different reasons than hers. Measuring her at a glance, he decided to look perturbed and unfocused. "A bill for what?"

She told the story, in brief, then finished by asking, "Did you ever have the library serviced?"

"I can't remember," he lied. "I thought I did."

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"It gets fixed or your son goes to public school. Unless, of course, you want to enroll him at an academy."

"We can't afford *that*." Dan gave a weary sigh. "How much did you say?"

She repeated the figure, thinking too late of inflating it by some cruel percentage.

"But did you shop around first?"

She said, "Yes."

"Pay half," he advised.

"You bastard."

"Oh, god. Are you going to fight me again?"

"For the rest of your life," she advised. "If you don't meet your obligations, what can I do?"

"What I'm saying is that we both pay half...then we let the lawyers decide if I owe more. Okay?"

The lawyers were useless. They squabbled worse than she and Dan could manage, being highly trained professionals.

"How's Harry?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

There was that hesitation, instantaneous but unmistakable, that told her this wasn't a good time. But he said, "All right," because good fathers always want to talk to their sons. "I mean, if he's there and not too busy."

"Not at all." She blanked the screen, then called up one of their private, protected files. Two months ago, as a birthday gift, Amy took Harry to a portrait studio where they made elaborate digitals of him moving and speaking, asking him endless questions in the process. Around that information they built a computer simulation of him. It was much more sophisticated than an answering program. These simulations were fads in the past — probably years ago, Amy realized — but she had assumed it would serve as a reliable friend for Harry. Wasn't it said that twins were never alone? Except he didn't use it often or for long, which meant that his mirror image was never quite up to date on his life.

Yet his father didn't seem to notice.

She had Dan talking to the simulation, a couple minutes passing and no hint of enlightenment or anger.

Slinking out of the bedroom, she felt a mixture of poisonous glee and calm fury. What kind of father could be fooled by a false son? she asked

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herself. And what kind of woman happily marries such a blind, stupid pig?

The library had been purged; untainted knowledge was flowing into the newly made emptiness.

Amy watched for a while, then said, "I was wondering," without knowing quite what she wanted. "Could I possibly, when you aren't too busy ... could I see that truck of yours?" A pause, then she added, "I'm sure it's fascinating."

Jacob and Harry were kneeling beside a control panel, the boy unconsciously mimicking the man's posture. It was Harry who brightened, telling her, "I can take you, Mom."

That wasn't what she wanted, but she remained silent.

Jacob read her expression, at least in part. With a paternal pat on the shoulder, he said, "Do me a favor, Harry? Watch everything." He spoke as if he had told hundreds of boys these words. "Watch but don't touch, and I'll be back in a few minutes."

Harry groaned.

Laughing, Jacob informed him, "You'll live."

Amy led the way until they were outdoors, then they walked together, cool air and a high gray sky causing her to cross her arms against her chest. Why was she nervous? It took her a moment to remember why. Jacob leapt into the truck's open back end, then offered his hand, the strong forearm making her fly for an instant.

A modern, commercial-grade library halfway filled the truck.

She had expected a humming sound, some sense of machinery hard at work; but the loudest sound besides her own quick breathing was a mild, dry click-click-click that came from nowhere and meant nothing. The machinery was a wonder of efficiency and compression. Plastic panels encased the countless circuits, and Amy touched the panels, feeling a very slight heat that might have been her own heat reflected back at her. She gave a weak cough, then sighed, growing aware of Jacob's gaze. She forced herself to say, "Very nice."

"'Everything we know; everything we are.'" He chuckled, adding, "As of seven o'clock this morning."

She couldn't speak.

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"Certified," he told her, fingering some kind of glass tag. "The Bureau of Libraries its own self guarantees our purity."

With a dry mouth, she said, "You know all about this."

"I guess," he allowed, humility and confidence in balance.

"And you know about myrtles." She glanced at him. "You know a great deal about them, don't you?"

"More than some know."

"Can you make myrtles?"

"Anyone can."

"Good ones, I mean. Ones that get past the skeptics." *Ones that are noticed,* she thought.

The brown eyes were capable of shrewdness. "For what purpose?"

"For money," she blurted. Then, as if to make it more clear, "For me. Because I'd like to hire you."

"To do what, ma'am?"

"I'm separated from my husband." Her arms tried to cross on her chest, lacked the strength and fell at her sides. "He isn't coming here soon. I just said that." A pause. "I didn't know you before."

"Ah," said the myrtle man.

"If we can agree on terms, I'd like you to —"

"Excuse me. Ma'am? Do you know me now?"

Forget it, she thought, turning to leave.

"What kind of myrtle do you want?"

She hesitated, then turned again. "Something to make my husband look ridiculous. I was thinking, I don't know...we could put him inside a filthy digital. I've seen the homemade ones — "

"Who hasn't?"

"Could you? I mean, what would you charge?"

"To embarrass him, you mean." Jacob almost smiled. "You're angry, and you want revenge."

She imagined her husband fucking a goat. In clear detail, she saw him behind a big shaggy angora, fighting it, trying to screw it while the goat twisted and bleated and kicked.

Jacob said, "I won't."

He said, "Technically, it's a crime. Not very enforceable, but this is my career and my life. I could lose my license. And frankly, I don't know your

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husband. I have no opinion about him. If I did this just for money, it would take more money than I think you could find. Ma'am."

He hated her, she believed. Suddenly nothing else mattered. He saw a bitter, ineffectual woman — true enough — and she wanted to run or scream, anything but stand by passively while this working class technician spoke to her.

Yet that's what she did, hearing the words and the steady click-clicks between them.

"I never finished my story," he said.

He said, "About the origins of the word 'myrtle.'"

She made her eyes lift, focusing on the unhandsome, smiling face.

"It was invented by that old-timer, remember? But what I didn't tell is that a few years later, after the word had passed into everyday usage, a reporter got the very good idea of finding its origins. Not a difficult trick, if you have a good librarian AI. Nobody had such a thing in his day, but he did trace the word to a published account of the speech, then to the speaker herself. She was willing to take credit for myrtles, but when he asked about dear Aunt Myrtle, she got quiet.

"'I can't find her,' the reporter confessed. 'She isn't a close relative, is she? How about distant? Or was she just a family friend?'"

Amy found herself listening, concentrating on each word.

"Finally the woman said, 'Oh, I never had an Aunt Myrtle.'"

"No?" said Amy.

"'I just invented her. I used that story as an example, and the name seemed appropriate.'" Jacob paused, smiling with delight. "Do you see? Myrtle was a little white lie told for an unimportant speech, and she had no way of knowing what would happen to her fictional aunt."

Amy leaned against the warm wall of plastic, not touched in any profound way but wishing she could be. In a voice more amused than anything, she said, "Aunt Myrtle is a myrtle. Is that what you're telling me?"

A rakish wink and nod.

"I guess I am," said Jacob, offering a hand to help her climb down again. "There you go, ma'am."

He ate lunch with Harry and her. The work was finished by three, most of the afternoon spent checking his work and installing top-grade skeptics. By

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then Amy had enough confidence — in him and in herself — to invite Jacob back for dinner. As much as anything, it was because of Harry's affection for the man; and Harry overheard the offer, bursting into the library and squealing, "Please come, please!"

The myrtle man had another job waiting, but he graciously promised to swing past, though it might be late.

True to his word, he was late by two hours, full of stories about his client who had wanted to find certain lost files. They were comedians, though later, replaying them in her mind, Amy couldn't discover why they had seemed funny, attributing their joy to the spirited teller.

Jacob left before ten, praising the reheated dinner as he excused himself. He wouldn't return; Amy was certain. Drifting into Harry's room, she blanked the reader, nine authentic planets vanishing to black. Then she went to her room, closing the door and undressing, lying on her covers, using her right hand with an expertness, eyes closed, an imaginary man who could have been Jacob hovering over her.

TWO DAYS LATER, when Harry was visiting his father, the myrtle man reappeared. He wore jeans, not the uniform. He apologized for coming on a Saturday and for every inconvenience, but he wanted to know if her library worked as promised. When she said that it was fine, he said, "Good." Then he gave the air above her head a shy glance, asking, "Would you like to go out to dinner? My treat."

He drove her to a small restaurant near her home, a tiny place that she hadn't noticed in all the years of driving past it. The food was fair, the company engaging. Afterwards, Amy invited him inside, then with a certain nervous courage to her bedroom, and Jacob stayed through Sunday evening, the ready change of clothes in his car seeming like good fortune, nothing more.

The sex was pleasant. Jacob had quirky tastes and an intensity, yet he could appear remote and self-involved in the most intimate moments. He seemed appreciative of her body, complimenting her features without forcing his words. If she wasn't satiated, at least it was a pleasure to have reentered the carefree world of adults. A lot of tiny fears began to vanish — Harry's weight seemed less ominous — and the big fears had softer edges and

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promising gaps. She found herself looking forward to the weekends and the confidence they brought, and her newfound strength would carry her through a week, and sometimes longer.

Jacob had to miss some weekends. Once a month he could visit his children, and since they were on the other side of the state, Amy could understand his absence, always wishing him a good trip.

Sometimes he visited on weekday evenings, Harry always thrilled to see the myrtle man. Still dressed in the brown uniform with the nametag, Jacob would sit at the kitchen table, entertaining his audience with stories of work, of myrtles seen and clients left satisfied.

Despite her nature, Amy learned about libraries.

Jacob tinkered with hers, sometimes into the morning hours, Harry helping as long as exuberance and his mother would allow. "I love these old 9s," Jacob declared, clucking his tongue in a happy way. "It's like working on a classic car." Spare, second-hand components were added, speeding the library's recall and somehow compressing its files, and he upgraded the readers, their images brilliant and sharp. "More real than real life," he boasted. "Don't you agree, Amy?"

Partly because of her boyfriend's encouragement, but mostly because she was tired of feeling stupid, Amy decided to master one of the more sophisticated digital design programs. "An imagination," Jacob called it. With it, she built a city beside a foggy sea, mapping every street, every building, then giving each citizen a recognizable face; and when Harry was at his father's, she and Jacob would sit naked before the living room reader, watching her newborn people remove each other's clothes, then make love without shame or taboos.

Amy did eventually fashion digitals of her husband, then dropped them into a variety of Hells. It was a therapeutic exercise, or it was juvenile; either way, the images of suffering became tiresome, then painful, and she erased all of them in a moment of contentment.

Once, mostly at Amy's insistence, she and Harry went to visit Jacob at his minuscule apartment. The neighborhood was poor. His two rooms were dirty despite some hurried attempts to make them presentable. Pity and revulsion in balance, she entertained the idea of asking Jacob to live with them. They had dated for six months; didn't it seem like time? But then she found herself hesitating, gazing at the old-fashioned stove, cooking pots set

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on cooking pots and layers of dust on every flat surface.

Sloppiness shouldn't keep her from offering Jacob her home. But the hesitations persisted.

Walking to the car, flanked by the two boys, Amy tried to force herself to bring up living together. But then Harry was asking how it was to share a library with all the other apartments — the building had an old second-hand library in the basement — and Jacob told him, "It works fine. I just have to remember to protect everything personal. That's all."

It was then, with those words, Amy realized that he had a private life, or lives, and she knew little about him. His apartment was a census address, little more, and where did Jacob sleep when he wasn't with her?

A cold spike of metal was in her belly.

Jacob and Harry kept walking, one telling the other, "As soon as I can, I'm going to become a myrtle man."

Maybe Jacob sensed the change in her.

More likely it was a mutual change, both of them aware of their distance and neither willing to mention it.

He arrived every weekend for a month, as if proving his devotion, but then missed two weekends in a row, some vague family trouble taking him out of town. Amy called his apartment anyway, leaving a string of well-practiced and unemotional messages. She saw him next on Tuesday, very late and without warning. Jacob didn't mention the messages or his travels. He told her that she looked lovely, then thanked her too many times for a dinner of leftovers. He was getting ready to break up with her, she believed, which made her more sad than she expected. Yet they went to bed as usual, making love, then resting, then making love again.

Now we'll break up, she decided.

Except they didn't. At least they didn't in any familiar way. With a thick, slow voice, he told her, "Here's something funny about myrtles."

"What's funny?"

He rose up on his elbow, saying, "They're true."

"What do you mean?"

A long, long stare, then he explained. "I read this once in a physics text. Whenever a particle moves, like an electron...well, it moves in every possible direction. At least they think so."

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So what? she thought.

"Each time it moves," he said, "the universe divides in all directions. Everything that's possible is going to happen." A long pause. "Remember that left-handed earth? It exists somewhere, and not as zeros and ones. A million million of those earths are scattered across Creation." A deep sigh. "Now isn't that a wondrous thought?"

Amy was more puzzled than enthralled.

"Lives," said the myrtle man, "divide when they're given the chance."

"Maybe so," was the best she could offer; and eventually, after she was fast asleep, Jacob rose and dressed, then visited the old library before slipping away.

Harry discovered the myrtle some weeks later.

By then both of them had finished grieving over Jacob's disappearance, at least outwardly. Amy didn't call him anymore. She didn't like looking at his projected likeness — a homely man, wasn't he? — and she decided that an explanation wasn't necessary. She progressed to where she could be alone and content, steeling herself to the prospects of never having another man in her life. And the boy seemed back to normal, if somewhat more quiet than before. His tutor claimed he was studying hard; his father didn't mention odd moods or behaviors. Then one evening he came to Amy, saying, "He's still here." Harry spoke with a mixture of matter-of-factness and happiness, adding, "I can see him and us, too."

She went to look. On the screen in her son's room was the mirror image of her son playing in a room just like this one, save for tiny details. Harry showed her how to change their viewpoint. When she said, "It's just your birthday present," he took her to the other rooms in the fantasy house, the likeness of her kissing the homely likeness of Jacob down in the living room, beneath a projected Monet.

Between kisses, they spoke, voices ordinary and the words as forgettable as real life.

Harry was sent to bed, forbidden to do what Amy couldn't stop doing, watching figures of moving light, a rising sense of horror making her sob and groan aloud.

The myrtle people made love, then began naming names.

"Yvonne," said the woman.

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"How about Jennifer?" said the man.

"I like Patricia," said the woman, giving her belly a meaningful squeeze. "My grandmother's named Patricia."

It was. But how would Jacob know?

"We'll name her after your grandmother," said the man, engulfing her and kissing her until the instant Amy blanked the damned screen.

"It's not a myrtle," the technician told her. "A true myrtle has to be sent around the Net. This one doesn't go anywhere."

"I didn't make it."

"I know. Your old boyfriend did."

Amy looked at the woman standing before her. A gray uniform in place of a brown one, and the different sex. Otherwise she was the same as Jacob when he first arrived, an object of suspicion coping with a frazzled and ignorant client. "Can you get rid of it?"

"I can get rid of anything," was the terse reply.

What should she do? Her silly pots weren't selling, and her investment incomes were flat, and she sure as hell couldn't call Dan and beg for money now. Not for this. Not if the library needed another purge —

"But you know, you could get rid of it yourself. I don't even need to be here."

Amy straightened. "Pardon me?"

The technician pointed to fake brown books on a high shelf. "They're add-ons. Good ones. Your boyfriend must have installed them. Their entire capacity is being spent maintaining that simulation, and three different AIs are doing nothing but browsing in your files, getting ideas for stories." An appreciative nod, then she asked, "Did you have your library serviced sometime recently?"

"Not that recently."

The technician named the dealer. "Was it?"

"I think so."

"So you know Mr. Turnbull, do you?"

Amy willed herself to say nothing, to do nothing.

Yet the technician read her face, laughing hard and telling her, "I thought the work looked familiar."

"I'll sue," Amy whispered.

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"Sue who? You had a personal relationship with the man, and you let him work in here. Am I right?" Not waiting for a reply, she said, "Jacob does this to a lot of ladies, dear."

She didn't care if she was the only victim. "I can get rid of it myself. You said that?"

"With a crowbar, if you want. Just unplug your connections up there and give a little jerk." Then she laughed, saying, "A little jerk for the big jerk. Isn't that perfect, dear?"

Amy said nothing.

"Yeah, he charms them. Beds them. Then leaves them with some pretend little world." An angry sigh, then she added, "Maybe that's to make amends. Who knows?"

"He said he has an ex-wife and two children."

"Maybe. But I haven't heard about them."

Gazing up at the brown nonbooks, she thought: *I can take you down any time I want.*

Then the woman touched a shoulder, waiting for Amy's eyes to find hers. "Or if you look at it another way, the jerk's got fifty ex-wives and maybe a hundred or more kids. I bet that's the way he sees it."

"I bet so."

SHE DIDN'T remove the fantasy that day, or the next. For several weeks, Amy went to bed planning to do the chore in the morning, and each morning there was an excuse that presented itself, making it seem as if some voice was asking for a stay of execution. She had an upturn in orders for her pots, an elderly woman wanting to decorate her home with recreations of certain Indian pottery. Then came a sudden inexplicable interest in the fantasy she had built with Jacob's help, those people in their coastal city having waited too long in stasis. With money from the pots, she bought AIs to help her spin details and biographies. Zeros and ones, she began to realize, were more malleable than any wet clay.

Because she knew so much about disappointment and unhappiness, Amy made the city joyful; and after months of work and growing expertise, she decided to release her project into the Net, its identity incorporated into every willing library, its streets and homes ready to welcome all visitors.

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With each use — by law — Amy received a modest sum.

She wasn't making any fortunes, but there was breathing room even when Dan's support payments failed to arrive.

Jacob's myrtle — she always thought of it as a myrtle — remained in her library. Harry was outlawed from watching it. So was Amy, in theory, though there were exceptions on weak days, and strong ones. The false Amy had a daughter, then twin sons. The false Jacob acted too saintly to be real, but the false Harry lost his weight and grew up to resemble neither of his parents, which was surprisingly accurate.

She didn't destroy the myrtle.

Not contemplative by nature, Amy was slow to understand why. But eventually, after she was remarried and preparing to move away, the answer occurred to her without warning. She thought of Jacob and his odd story about electrons in motion, dividing the universe infinite times. If that was true, then she had saved something that didn't need saving. It existed. A troubling notion, it caused her to sit in the library and stare at the bindings; and after careful thought and some hardwon inspiration, she realized that lives, infinite or not, needed to be lived as if they would have no other chance in Creation.

It was as close to profound as she ever managed, and partly because of that insight, she took the old-fashioned add-ons and AIs with her each time she moved. She didn't look at their contents. Really, she thought, those lives weren't any of her business.

Let them live as they wanted; that was her policy.

Amy lived as she wanted, and when she wasn't happy, at least she was confident that happiness would come again. It always did. Wait long enough, she was learning, and everything always came to your door again.

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On the surface, Jerry Oltion's life is deceptively simple. He has been married to the same woman for sixteen years. He has a successful writing career (with over sixty stories in Analog *alone), and recently his car (well, actually his wife's car, a vintage Volkswagen Bug) had a major role in the Disney Channel movie* The Four Diamonds.

But his life is not simple. In fact, no one's is, as the following story shows.

Uncertainty

By Jerry Oltion

JASON IS EXCITED AS HE parks the demonstrator LeBaron in front of his house. He parks on the street so his neighbors can see it, and maybe decide to buy one. That's not likely, but it's possible, and a car salesman plays the odds. If you greet enough customers, put the cars in front of enough people, someone will buy one. As they have done today. A brand new Imperial, cash, and Jason already has the commission check in his breast pocket.

He fingers the crisp paper as he walks up the driveway to the door. Yes, still there. And just before Christmas. Ginny will be pleased. He tries the doorknob before he goes for his house keys, but it is locked. Not a good sign. If Ginny were home, she would have left it open for him, maybe even met him at the door. Unless she got caught up in something and forgot the time. That's happened before. So Jason sets his briefcase on the concrete step and fishes in his pocket for the keys, unlocks the door, and as he steps into the darkened house he says loudly, hopefully, "Honey, I'm home!"

The silent house returns not even an echo. Jason switches on the kitchen

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light and takes a cautious sniff. No aroma of freshly baked bread, no meaty heaviness of a roast or even a hamburger casserole. The wave function has collapsed; the universe has chosen. Ginny is not home today.

She might have been. That's the most frustrating aspect of the whole thing. Until Jason checked to see, she might have been right here in this kitchen, wanting him as eagerly as he wanted her, but the very act of arriving was enough to set the universal dice in motion and tonight they came up snake-eyes.

He turns around and steps outside again, closing the door behind him. A virtual couple pops into being on the sidewalk beside his car, a teenage boy and girl walking arm-in-arm. She nods at something he says, then laughs. They take three steps before vanishing, their very existence swallowed in the quantum foam.

Jason shivers and opens the door again, but Ginny is still gone. He knew she would be; the universe can't be fooled that easily.

He sets the commission check on the kitchen table and plods through the house, shedding briefcase, shoes, tie, and the rest of his clothing along the way into the bedroom, where he collapses backward on the bed and stares at the ceiling. The lunar landscape of its textured surface is dimly lit from the evening light filtering through the window overlooking the back yard. Jason tells himself that the ceiling is a good metaphor for his life, that the even pattern of bumps up there results from the same randomness that haunts his marriage. The carpenter who made the ceiling had no idea where each speck of grout would go; he just sprayed them upward in a great shower of mud, and the overall, aggregate pattern of those thousands of flying particles turned out to have a kind of order to them. Even though it was theoretically possible, the carpenter probably didn't worry about them all landing in the same place, or inexplicably avoiding an area shaped like, say, the face of the Madonna.

It's a lousy metaphor and Jason knows it. Yes, overall he and Ginny have a happy marriage, but he wants her *now*. Now, this instant, warm and cuddly with her auburn hair dancing in loopy curls around her ears, her smile wide and inviting...

Jason gets up abruptly, pads into the bathroom, and takes a shower. He scrubs off the day's sweat first, then closes his eyes and satisfies his other need as best he can. It isn't enough. He opens his eyes, looking at the bright white tiles with the beads of water forming and falling from them. Thousands of

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drops, spraying randomly off his chest, yet forming an even distribution along the wall. A Gaussian distribution, named after Karl F. Gauss, the German mathematician who studied randomness before Schrödinger, the other doyen of particle behavior, was even a boy. Jason knows these things. He has read up on the subject. Yet as so many physicists have learned, knowing how a phenomenon works doesn't mean he can control it.

Jason still needs some kind of release. He reaches forward and turns the faucet slowly to cold, gritting his teeth until the primal whoop bursts from his lungs. This time the whole house echoes.

The next evening she is home. Jason knows that last night has nothing to do with tonight, that random events by definition cannot influence one another. A tossed coin can come up tails a dozen times in a row and still have a fifty-fifty chance on the next throw.

But tonight it's heads. For Jason. Trouble is, evidently Ginny is having a tails sort of day, because the moment he opens the door he feels himself fading away. He gets a glimpse of her talking on the phone, but when she turns she looks right through him and Jason goes where virtual particles go when they annihilate.

When awareness returns, he is sitting on a stool at the end of a polished mahogany bar. A tall glass in front of him holds ice and a straw, and smells of gin. Jason groans. Of all the places he could go, why does he keep coming here? Only a cheap motel would be worse. But either way, whether he reeked of gin or perfume, if he were to go home now his marriage would be ruined. Jason knows this with instinctive certainty. Ginny may suspect where he goes, but she must never know.

He orders coffee from the gray-haired bartender, slurps down two cups while watching the other patrons in the mirror. How many of them came here voluntarily? he wonders. How many are victims of chance?

In one of those random moments when all the voices are silent but one, he hears: "Okay, a Frenchman, a Mexican, and a Texan are in a balloon..."

Jason laughs, but not at the punch line.

When he gets home, Ginny is gone. This time it works in Jason's favor; there will be no argument tonight, no attempt to explain the inexplicable. No

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warm wife to snuggle with either, though. On the whole, Jason doesn't like the trade.

He looks in the bedroom closet, but her suitcase is still there. Sometimes it and some of her clothing is gone and he knows she is at her mother's, but tonight she could be anywhere. She could even be right here at home, simply phase-shifted so they cannot interact.

He goes to bed and holds her pillow, imagining that it is her.

The next day he considers calling her from work to find out what he'll be facing when he goes home, but he has tried that before and it doesn't work. Early knowledge gives him no more satisfaction than none, and finding her home during the day doesn't guarantee anything anyway; she is indeterminate again by the time he arrives.

He imagines one of his co-workers overhearing him on the phone, maybe even saying something like, "Checking up on the little woman, eh?" but he knows that will never happen. Such a statement might be misconstrued, and even if the meaning could somehow be made unambiguous, whether or not their wives are home to greet them at night is not something men talk about. Not these men, at least. Yet Jason wonders if they all struggle with the same uncertainty. Some of them even have kids; Jason shudders to think of what it must be like to go to bed without knowing that your child is safe in his room. Always wondering, as Jason wonders on the lonely nights, whether this time your loved ones are lost for good. Or whether *you* are lost to your family.

He and Ginny have decided to wait until they solve their problem before they have kids of their own. It's one of the few things about which they both agree perfectly.

But the problem has no solution. Heisenberg proved that. You can never know both the position and the disposition of your spouse to infinite accuracy.

THAT NIGHT he takes a pickup from the lot and brings home a Christmas tree. He backs into the driveway so he can unload it easily, and as he gets out of the pickup he sees Ginny smiling at him through the kitchen window. A great weight slides away from him, and as he takes the few steps to the door he squares his shoulders, shakes his head so his hair will fall into that slightly

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mussed state she likes so much, and opens the door. "I'm ho-ome," he calls playfully, and she smiles, comes to him, kisses him with lips warm and soft and tasting of cookie dough. She is baking snickerdoodles, Jason's favorite.

"Tell me how they are," she says, handing him one still hot out of the oven.

He blows on it to cool it, takes a bite, feels it melt into a burst of sweetness and spice in his mouth. "Mmmm," he says, then kissing her again with crumbs still on his lips, "*Mmmmmm*."

In the bedroom she helps him change out of his suit, running her hands over his body and kneading the sore muscles in his back just as he'd wished she would for the last two nights. He rubs her back as well, and is about to unbutton her shirt when the oven timer goes off. Laughing, she twists away, and he feels a momentary pang of regret, but then he laughs and dresses in his casual clothes. There will be time enough for that later.

They decorate the tree, he hanging the gold balls and she the silver. They're careful not to let the antiparticles touch. Ginny suggests using just one kind, for safety, but Jason shakes his head and says, "If we did that, the energy balance would be off."

When the tree is decorated, heavy with cosmic strings and shimmering gamma rays, Jason goes into his study to wrap presents. He has bought many small things, not wanting to repeat the fiasco of two years ago when he bought Ginny a single diamond necklace. Of course when she opened the box, it was empty. Fifty-fifty chance. This year she'll get a few empty boxes, but half of them will be full.

He has even bought multiple presents for the cat, though he hasn't seen it for days.

After dinner they cuddle on the sofa. They whisper, they tickle, they laugh. Jason kisses her, softly at first, then more deeply. In the rush of excitement that follows, her shirt makes a quantum shift to the floor; then in a quick chain reaction the rest of their clothing follows. Inexorable pressure brings them together, the heat between them building and building until they undergo fusion.

Jason wishes they could remain in this state forever, but the isotope is unstable, as it always is. Fission inevitably follows. They move to the bed when bare skin begins to cool.

Later still, as they lie side by side under the covers, moonlight softening the shadows, he realizes this is the time he loves the most. The quiet time at

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the end of a perfect day. Hesitantly, he asks, "Do you — do you ever wish it could always be like this?"

She nods, an almost imperceptible tilt of her head. "Of course I do. But it can't be."

"Why not?" he asks.

"Because it isn't. The universe doesn't work that way." She turns on her side, away from him.

He knows he is treading on thin ice now, but he can't leave it alone. "I just wish — " he begins, but she says, "Jason, I can't always be your fantasy lover."

The moment has become as fragile as a uranium atom. Jason pauses, his mind seething with the possibilities. Virtual particles come into being, annihilate, while he tries to decide. Should he fire a neutron into the nucleus, directly into the heart of the matter? Increase its weight with questions until it splits apart, and in splitting yields its secrets? Or should he shield it, preserve its glittering presence for as long as possible? Jason feels the entire universe quiver with anticipation as he considers the ramifications. Weighs the options. Decides.

"Oh, but you are," he says, kissing her earlobe and nestling up against her like one spoon behind another. He holds her, and as she drifts off to sleep he thinks, You are my fantasy lover. And all the craziness, all the uncertainty, is worth it for these moments when it's fantastic.

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Ray Vukcevich has become known as one of the most original voices in the field today. His most recent story for F&SF, "Count on Me" in our October/November issue, displays his whimsical side. "Rug Rats" shows Ray's dark side. The story also shows that with Vukcevich, you never know what you're going to get.

Rug Rats

By Ray Vukcevich

THE THREE OF US DECIDED to bust out of the state orphanage way back in May to go looking for our Moms. Jack's our leader, and Nancy's his girl. I'm what you call the sidekick.

Sometimes we can get a dude down on his luck to say he's our old man so we can eat in one of those places where they make you pray before they feed you. Nancy's got the right stuff for that, the way she bows her head and turns her soft brown eyes up to look at him, please mister, won't be no trouble. We split before they can ask too many questions because we're never going back to singing the praises and hooking rugs and listening to crabby old Mr. Sweet bellyache about how much harder the kids in India work, and don't tell me I won't find my Mom. Jack messes up my hair and says sure you will kid, didn't she give you the words?

He means my pocket dictionary. He thinks all the words in the world are in the book my Mom pushed into my hands the day they took me away, and I don't tell him any different.

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We've been ducking and dodging for months now, and it's snowing, and it's so cold. We make cartoon bubbles when we breathe, but the bubbles don't say anything. Mostly we huddle in doorways, me in the middle, Jack on the lookout and Nancy all girl snugly soft hugging in close.

"Here comes one," Jack says and the two of them open like a flower and I get up rubbing my eyes to make them redder, and Nancy whispers, "just be the little dickens," pinches my cheek, and Jack points me at the woman shopper walking fast looking neither left nor right, and I go off like a little boy heat seeking missile come up to her say hey lady you seen Santa Claus?

This is the very moment she'll decide. Jack likes to say it depends on how deep down motherly she's feeling and whether she's had her charity fix yet today.

No luck this time. She brushes me aside and as she passes she looks back over her shoulder, looks sad, looks bewildered, drills me with those righteous eye-beams, suddenly mad as hell and not ready to take it anymore, hisses, "Get a job."

"But hey!" I yell. "I'm only ten years old!"

I want to use the B word on her. I glance over at Nancy who would be so disappointed in me if I used the B word, but I really really want to. I'd cry if I thought it would work, but the woman is already banging on down the street like I might run up and catch her and make her look at me again. Besides, these days I don't cry for nothing. I kick at a rock that isn't there. I put my hands in my pants pockets. I will *not* stand up straight don't even ask me to.

I slouch on back and say Sorry to Jack.

"Hey! It's not *your* fault." He straightens my cap, punches my shoulder, makes me feel okay, says, "Stay here, you guys, I'll go check out the Supermarket."

What he means is the dumpster behind the grocery store. Sometimes they forget to close the padlock. I settle down in the doorway with Nancy again, and we watch Jack quiet and quick like an alley shadow going going gone.

We wait forever, and I'm half asleep with my head on Nancy's shoulder when Jack gets back and squats down beside us.

"Look what I found."

I struggle to sit up. "What is it?"

"A turkey frank," Jack says.

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"Looks like somebody's weenie," I say, and Nancy makes amazed I can't believe you said that noises, and Jack laughs and Nancy says where *do* you get such ideas, and I can't stop grinning, feels so good it hurts and maybe it's just too much when everyone is paying attention to you, when it's finally your turn, and maybe I'll just go off like fireworks, light up the sky, be a million sparks down your neck, and Nancy sees that maybe it's time we just let the chuckles settle, and she says over the top of my head to Jack, "So how do you know it's a *turkey* frank?"

"The label," Jack says. "Last good one in the package." He puts the frank down on a scrap of cardboard, and we all lean in to look at it — so slick and pink and perfect.

"Wish we had some cranberry sauce," Jack says. He puts his hand on my arm. "Do you think you can find us some cranberry sauce in that book of yours?"

I take out my pocket dictionary and flip through the pages. I find an entry for "cranberry," but there is no cranberry sauce. I glance up at Jack and Nancy and see them waiting. I suck in my breath. I can do this. I move my finger across the page, pretending. I say, listen.

I say, don't you remember the way your Mom used to put the can in the refrigerator days and days ahead of time, and when you'd pour yourself a glass of milk or get a carrot stick, you'd see it and touch its rippling sides and silvery top and maybe peel the label back a little and you'd feel it getting colder and colder and then right before the big spread your Mom would open up not just one side but both ends of the can and shake the purple log of berries out so slow and slippery onto a snow white saucer and it would plop and splatter and slide and almost get away and she'd say whoops and you'd want a taste and she'd cut you a little slice and you'd put the spoon in your mouth and the red explosion would be so cold and sweet, and you'd push the jelly against the roof of your mouth and roll the berries with your tongue and feel the soft sticks and you'd shiver and squeeze your eyes shut and your Mom would laugh like music.

Nancy leans in and kisses me on the cheek.

Jack gives me a big thumbs up and takes out his rusty razor blade. "Turkey time." He cuts off the end of the frank and the smell of our holiday feast fills the air.

There is a low rumbling, a massive shuffling, and I see children rise from cardboard boxes; I see them slip from their alley hideaways; I see them pop

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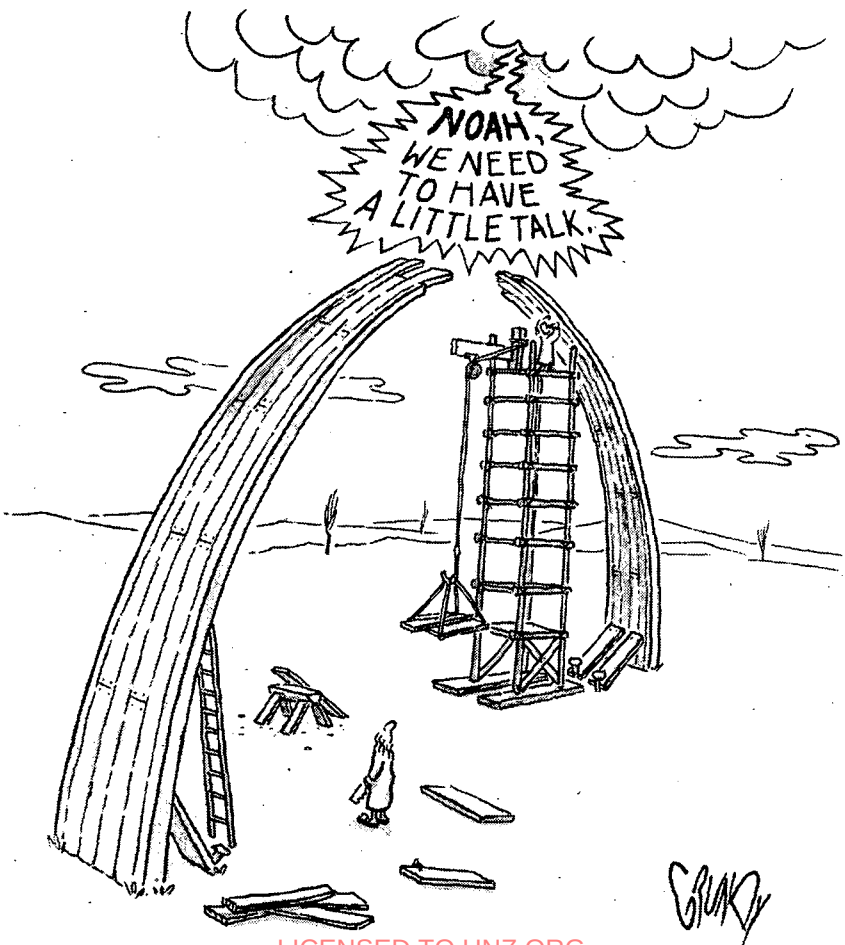
like sudden flowers from the carcasses of toppled cars, so many children, ragged waves of hunger closing in on us.

I panic. There will never be enough! And then I feel so ashamed of that mean-spirited thought, but Jack shakes his head at me and I know that he knows I didn't mean it; it's just that I am who I am, and he's Jack who rises and opens his arms to the multitude.

And the children gather at his feet, and when they've settled, Jack cuts the turkey frank with his razor blade, paper thin slice after paper thin slice, endlessly, wafers for the tongues of baby birds, and he feeds the children, each and every one.



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Carroll Brown is a third generation science fiction fan, with a master's degree in Literature from Michigan State University. "The Borderlands" is the first of two Brown stories we have in inventory: it also marks Cary's first sale. Since he sold "The Borderlands" to us, he has gone on to sell stories to Aboriginal SF, Haunts, *and* Distant Journeys.

He writes, "I've always viewed most 'monsters' sympathetically, without necessarily knowing why." "The Borderlands" is a zombie story with a twist: the horror doesn't come from the shuffling dead body, but from something far greater — and far more universal.

The Borderlands

By Carroll Brown

I CAUGHT THE ZOMBIE weeping in the middle aisle, between breakfast cereals and cookies, staring at an empty patch of moonlit wall near the ceiling. The broom rested lightly in his hands, cradled in his dead fingers with its bristles still flared at the bottom, as though he had stopped his sweeping in mid-stroke. That lack of sound, the sudden hush, had drawn me down the stairs, as someone who lived by the sea would have been surprised one night if the waves had suddenly stopped their gentle shushing and broken in silence on the sand.

I had stopped my silent pacing in the hall above the store; an art that I had mastered out of necessity and long practice, I spaced my footfalls carefully to thread the maze of loose boards that would wake Gwen, tell her instantly that I was out of bed again. If she found me here she would yell, plead, sulk in silence, coerce me to return to bed, to sleep. To the visions that still came every night, and that I still could not bear.

So at night I walked, measuring over and over the corridor that ran the

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length of the building, from one end of the apartment to the top of the stairs that led to the store below, until I collapsed from sheer exhaustion into utter darkness, too tired to dream.

Until the night the broom stopped.

"Albert?"

I didn't realize at first that he was weeping; I'd never heard of such a thing, and what could make a dead man weep? My first thought as I came down the stairs, seeing him motionless and striped with light and shadow falling through the shuttered window, was that something was wrong, that perhaps he had simply shut down, as sometimes they did, falling over in their tracks at their employers' feet, dropping their garden tools or the packages they were carrying; uncommon as such incidents were, it was the possibility of them that had kept from the zombies the right to drive.

But Albert was still standing, and it wasn't until I stepped closer that I saw the trails, silver ribbons in the moonlight, that ran down his cheeks.

"Albert, are you all right?"

His jaw hung slack, his shoulders slumped, and his gaze never wavered from that spot high on the wall. I followed it with my own eyes, straining to see what he was seeing, but whatever he watched was visible only to a zombie's eyes. I touched him lightly on the shoulder; I had never touched a zombie before, never had to handle Albert in the year that he'd been working for me. The flesh of his arm was unnaturally soft and pliant, like dough, and I shuddered.

"Albert," I said, a little more harshly.

After a long moment he lowered his gaze, turning toward me, and for a brief instant I thought I saw something there, a fire in the emptiness, a spark of "life." But that wasn't possible, and he turned away from me, shuffling off down the aisle as the store filled again with the soft rasping of straw on linoleum.

In retrospect, it feels like it was that moment that the thought first entered my mind. It's not possible, of course; I didn't yet know what I later learned, hadn't yet discovered what Albert saw, what was to be seen through the eyes of the dead. But perhaps some premonition, some shiver of a guess, had already set my mind in motion.

And I noticed, as Albert walked away from me, that he had not stopped weeping.

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* * *

Life has a way of pushing you in directions you never intended to go, of carrying you in its currents to whatever eddy or tidepool it chooses to deposit you. We had certainly never intended to own a corner grocery, my wife Gwendolyn and I. That was too "normal" for us, so damnably normal that I used to wake at night with knives in my stomach, the small but potent daggers of regret, cowardice, self-loathing. We had wanted adventure, high times and glamor. Unfortunately we were both dogged by an equally strong streak of reasonableness, a prudence that belied our years. When I finished school, working my way through as a stocker and then assistant manager at Brock's Groceries, we made plans to escape the city, settle someplace where adventure lurked around the corner (though you could still come home to a soft bed and a warm house at the end of the day). Colorado, maybe. Or Idaho.

Depressions have a way of changing plans.

When the time came, we just couldn't justify packing up for parts unknown without a job waiting, not in the state the country was in. The odds were against finding anything, and we had neither the savings to wait it out nor the passion to risk starvation. In the end, we settled.

I stayed on at Brock's, and Gwen at Swanson's department store, and we kept telling ourselves that one day we would just do it, just pack up and go, but right now we still owed on the car and couldn't afford to make the payments and insurance without a steady income. As soon as that was paid off, we'd head east, to the mountains.

Then came the furniture payments, and the credit card bills we'd racked up.

We bought Brock's the year I turned thirty. We'd thought long and hard, but in the end couldn't pass up the security; old man Brock offered it to me at a special price, seeing as how I'd been there thirteen years and basically running it the last five. The bank considered me stable and gave me the loan.

And that was that. Roots. Foundations. We were stuck.

Then we told ourselves that we'd take great vacations, but we could never afford much help, and with both of us working full time and then some at the store it was impossible for us both to be off at the same time. Someday, we told each other. One of these days we'll hire some more help, promote Bobby to Assistant Manager, let him run the day-to-day, and then we'll be free to go whenever we want. Someday.

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So of course, when they began offering the zombies, we snatched one up right away.

"Albert?"

The zombie turned toward Dr. Spaar, who checked a box on his clipboard and gave a nod that transformed into a shake of his head.

"I don't know what to tell you, Mr. Richards. In every test that I can run here, Albert checks out just fine. Motor control, homeostatic functions, sensory response, everything seems fine. I don't know what's wrong."

Albert faced front again, his eyes unblinking and locked on the wall, as if he were supremely interested in the six food groups as delineated by the FDA's poster. In fact, he probably couldn't even see the poster through his tears. Albert wept almost constantly now; it was why I had brought him to a doctor.

The second night I found him standing in the middle of the store, gazing up at nothing with overflowing eyes, I began to worry. After the first incident, I had made a perfunctory search for any information on weeping zombies, assuming it to be a rare but explicable phenomenon with highly technical causes; perhaps even something involuntary. I had been surprised to find absolutely nothing. Nothing in the local libraries, nothing in the free-access databases, no rumors among friends and acquaintances of anything of the sort that I had seen.

Perhaps, I thought, it was just an anomaly.

Two nights later I found him again in his state of...what, despair? Can a zombie feel despair, or any emotion? I had thought not, thought that had been a motivating factor behind the drive to hire them. They worked steadily, unemotionally, reliably; almost like robots in those stories. Not that anyone would mistreat them for it. After all, they were still people, just of a different sort. They had families, their living kin. They had everything the living had, except for one thing: they had no mind.

A week after the first incident, Albert came in weeping and nothing would make him stop. He still worked; he just wept while he did it. I thought it best to bring him for a checkup.

"The trouble is," Dr. Spaar was saying, "we just don't know enough about the brain still. Or about zombies. In many respects they're like coma patients: certain involuntary systems continue to function even though

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there's no EEG activity. But obviously they're more than that. The zombies have consciousness, of a sort. They see, hear, touch, feel. But do they think? Do they experience emotion? Is this sadness," he touched Albert's damp cheek, "or is this watering eyes? It would be helpful if they would speak to us, tell us what they're experiencing. Sometimes it's like treating an infant."

"'Would speak?' I assumed they *couldn't* talk," I said.

Dr. Spaar just shrugged. "They don't, but not for any physical reasons, not most of them anyway. Another one of the unanswered questions about zombies."

He smiled at me and shrugged again, gave Albert a pat on the shoulder. He didn't know, didn't particularly care. Nobody particularly cared about the dead. Unless it was one of theirs.

Karen was born on the Fourth of July, so that later I would tell her the whole country celebrated her birthday. Gwen, exhausted after thirty-seven hours of labor, collapsed into a well-deserved sleep, and I sat with our daughter for a time, until the doctors told me to put her down and leave her be, to go home for the night and get some sleep myself. Instead I lit sparklers and fireworks and danced through the streets like a madman.

She was the type of child that everyone, not just grandparents, calls "an angel," which meant she mostly took after Gwen. Physically, she was my wife in miniature, with the same small nose, the widely spaced green eyes, the hair just one brown tone shy of blonde. And her smile, the mischievous cocked-head grin.

Inside, she was Daddy's little girl, and she clung to me and followed me around the store as soon as she could move, first at a crawl and later in that perpetual run, half a step ahead of a fall forward, of the two-year-old. For a time I carried her in a rucksack on my back as I worked around the store, fearful of mischance and mischief, humming songs to her and feeling her small, warm breath on my neck. Gwen told me I looked like a Bolivian housewife, and besides the child would never learn to walk if her feet never touched the ground. I gave in, and turned her loose.

For months I still thought I felt her breath on my neck, and would smile.

Fortunately, the zombies had already begun appearing by that time, had been around long enough to have entered the work force. Mitchell, Albert's predecessor as general helper at the store, had been left as Bobby's sole help

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in the days we were gone, the almost two days of labor, of Gwen screaming with the delights of natural childbirth and me hovering and pacing and chain smoking the celebratory cigars I had bought. By all accounts they managed things quite well, to our pleasant surprise.

Even more surprising, as we discovered when Gwen returned to work and brought our daughter with her, Mitchell was good with children. He handled Karen like a flower, hovering protectively nearby whenever we let her play on the floor in front of the cash register, and though initially images of Boris Karloff as Frankenstein's monster crowded my mind so that I vowed never to let the two of them near daisies or wells, Mitchell never raised a finger against her, never even bumped her accidentally.

I learned later he'd had two daughters in life, both of whom he'd survived.

Something is happening in their brains; it's not raw pulp, I'm convinced of that. They tell us, for those who care, that they lack higher brain functions, that the brainstem and cerebellum still function for the most part, but the cerebrum and cortex are almost functionless. They have no memories, no real thought, just baseline comprehension and reaction; but Mitchell remembered his daughters, and saw in mine a reflection of them.

I know that look in his eye, recognize it in hindsight. I see it in the morning when I look in the mirror, written in the dark circles of sleeplessness. Loss, longing, and delicate shades of madness.

And now I know why Albert weeps.

I DROVE HIM out to the small tract house that was his family's home. A cute little box of a place, identical to the rows upon rows of cute little boxes that surrounded it, all of which had sprung up in the forties and fifties, in the explosion of returning vets. They were old now and starting to collapse, the ones not kept up, but it said something to me that slapped-together houses of fifty years past looked better than "quality-built" homes erected ten years ago.

They didn't have a porch, just a concrete stoop that jutted out from the front door. Barbara Ann Davison sat on it, a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, talking with her husband Bill and a neighbor. I could hear her laughter as I drove up.

The neighbor glared darkly at me, muttering something to Barb and scurrying off as I opened the door for Albert.

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"Hi, Mr. Richards." Barb nodded as we walked up. "Hello, Dad." I noticed she had to take a swig of beer before the second greeting.

Albert didn't acknowledge her, simply stepped past her and into the house beyond. She flinched as his arm brushed her shoulder.

"What brings you out here to the suburbs, Mr. Richards?" Bill's voice boomed in false conviviality.

"Well, I wanted to bring his paycheck by — "

"Could've mailed it as usual," Barb said.

" — and talk to you about something."

"Dad?"

I nodded.

For a long moment I wasn't sure what she might do. She stared at the cracked cement, the cigarette dangling between her fingers and the smoke rising in chaotic swirls. After a long while she sighed.

"Bill, go in and make sure Dad's okay, willya?"

Bill nodded and patted his wife on the shoulder, following the zombie inside. We all knew zombies didn't need looking after.

I waited until Bill was well gone. "You've noticed it, too?"

"The crying? Yeah, I've noticed it."

"What is it?"

She shook her head, refusing to look at me, staring off down the street of houses that seemed to reflect away in both directions infinitely, like two mirrors held facing each other.

"What do you think it is?"

"No idea," she said. She gave a harsh, barking laugh. "Dad never was what you'd call a real happy person. Even when he was alive."

She lapsed again into silence.

"There's something you're not telling me," I said.

"Just thinking how to say it," she answered. "All these zombies and stuff, it's real hard to talk about. Oh, I expect you don't have much problem. He's just a guy that comes and works for you, stays with you five days a week, good worker once you get used to the sight of ligaments and muscles and shit hanging out of him. But that happens pretty quickly, doesn't it. He's just an employee. You ever had one of yours come back? Just when I get used to the idea that him and Mom are gone, gone for good and not just in Florida until May, just when I can say 'they're dead' without breaking up, he shows up."

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She looked away again; her eyes were dry, but a deep flush colored her cheeks, and her voice skipped along in breaths. "Like that. All gross, it still scares me to look at him. He doesn't talk, doesn't hold me close, just sits there staring. But what can I do? He's my dad."

"I'm sorry." It's pathetic and useless, and it's all I can say. She was right; I didn't know what it was like. Part of me wanted to ask her, "Isn't it better that he's here at all? He's still your dad, and aren't you grateful for a second chance? Not all of us got that, some of us would kill for that." But I had no right. Instead I just asked, "When did you first find him crying?"

"About two weeks ago. I woke up, middle of the night some time. Thought I heard a noise or something, so I get up and look down the hall. Dad usually sits in the chair in the living room at night, right where the hall empties out there, so I can see him when I look down the hall. Only he wasn't there. And I hear this noise, like I left a window open and the wind's coming through. So I follow it.

"Dad's standing in the kitchen. Just standing there in the middle of the room, looking up by the ceiling. His arms are out, like he's reaching for something, and in the moonlight I can see he's crying. He's crying and I didn't even know they could cry, and he never cried once while he was alive, not that I saw. And he's making this sound, this whisper, I got up real close, and he just ignores me like I'm not there, so I can hear. And he's saying 'Maggie, Maggie,' over and over, looking up at the wall:"

Barb's voice had become a thin scratch of sound; the effort to keep it steady made the veins in her neck rise in cords beneath the skin. I glanced up, and Bill stood behind her, inside the screen door. He looked as if he might cry himself; he wanted to come out, to comfort his wife, but she was not the type of woman who accepted such things, so Bill held his ground.

"Maggie was my mother's name," she finished, and finally she turned toward me, a flame in her eyes, a fire of grief like I'd seen in her father's eyes nights before. "How come she didn't come back, too, Mr. Richards? She was with him when they died. How come he came back alone?"

I didn't know, and I had no words of comfort, because I could feel my own grief overwhelming me, and a damnable hope and despair. I drove off quickly, leaving her alone on the stoop, watched over by the indistinct form of her husband, half-hidden by the screen and the shadows indoors.

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Karen grew fine and strong and all the things a parent wishes for a child. Gwen and I, for the first time, I think, accepted our lot in life, the place we'd ended up. We might not have a life to sing about, but we had Karen, and she was more than compensation. Maybe, we told ourselves, when she's grown, when she's a young woman and leaving for her own life we'll think again of adventures and faraway places. For now, we have paradise here.

Five short years, half a decade of paradise, is too cruel. It would have been better, I screamed at night, never to have given us a taste of it at all, to have left us childless and bitter to the end of our days rather than...

A car. Like so many others every day, but it's always *others*. It's never our own. A car trying to beat a red light, failing, not even close, accelerating to squeeze through before the flow of traffic changed direction, failing.

Gwen and Karen, pulling into the intersection.

They were both belted, strapped in and secure, as well protected as they could be. Gwen had become quite fanatic about that, had even lobbied for stronger seat belt laws after Karen was born. You protect your own.

Sometimes it's not enough.

Gwen lived, to her great and utter despair. The car hit the passenger side. Karen's side. The cheap metal crumpled like paper. It drove inward, slamming into Karen, into her side and her head, the window shattering and spraying across her face.

They said she never felt a thing. I don't believe them. In my mind's eye I'm with her, and time slows so that every instant is an endless moment of recognition and fear: the sight, out of the corner of our eye, of the oncoming car; our mouth, opening in a high scream; the door bulging, reaching for us; the glass bending in, gleaming like a bubble before it pops, bursting over us; the long, clawing descent into darkness.

Five short years of Heaven before we were cast out. You learn sympathy for the devil.

The funeral was well attended, for Karen was a well-loved child, and a small sea of black-garbed children and adults covered the manicured lawn. Gwen stood beside me still as a stone, her face locked in an impassive gaze into the distance. Bruises marked her cheek and forehead, and when we were alone I'd seen her wince when she walked as the broken ribs ground at her, but this was all the damage the crash had caused her, physically. And that was her punishment, she had told me one night. We'd sat, huddled in each other's

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arms, and I'd been unable to stop my own endless torrent of grief and longing, and Gwen had watched in silence, dry-eyed. Shamed and raging, I had screamed at her, accused her of not loving our daughter, of not caring. I don't know how she didn't hate me in that moment.

"This is my punishment," she'd said, touching the green and black stains on her face. "This is God laughing at me. He took my baby, and all he left me was this." In some odd way it would have been kinder to her if she'd suffered more, been more severely injured, participated more fully in Karen's death. Instead she'd been shut out entirely, left to live with it and unable to justify her own pristine condition.

I had held her then, and asked her forgiveness, and cried through the night.

And now her eyes were still dry and her mind was far away. I looked at the crowd, seeing faces I knew, those I didn't, all wrinkled in grief and pity as they gazed on her pathetically small casket and the minister spoke in solemn tones about resurrection and rebirth.

My eyes fell on Mitchell. He stood somberly, as he always did, and somewhere he had found a dark suit. It was moth-eaten, holed through in several spots, many years out of date and exuding an aura of dusty dinginess. It so perfectly belonged on a zombie that I almost laughed out loud.

And bit my tongue as my brain leapt to associations. Zombies, resurrection. Dear God, it had never occurred to me before that moment. No one thinks of the dead, until it's one of theirs.

No one understood, no one could predict who would come back. Would Karen return to us in a few weeks' time? Would we see her little body shuffling blankly around our home, an empty husk, a flameless candle? Could we stand that? Could we live with our child, five years old and no love in her eyes, forever?

I don't remember the rest of the service.

I never told Gwen of my thoughts, and if similar ideas occurred to her, she never told me. We went about our lives in fear and hope.

When it was obvious Karen was not coming back, I sat up all night and cried. I don't know if they were tears of thanks or of despair, that I would truly never see my little girl again.

The zombie found me weeping in the moonlight, huddled behind the

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counter in the dark store. He never said a word, of course, never showed any emotion; he just reached out a hand to me, reached down and helped me to my feet.

July 18th. The day was always like this, always found me, by its last minutes, crying someplace. But it wasn't usually this bad, this overwhelming. She would have been twelve years old, I'd thought to myself, if seven years ago today Gwen had taken a different route, or the other driver had, or I'd held Gwen for five seconds longer at the door before they left, or Karen. Just as I'd thought, in years past, she'd be eleven today, ten today, if only, if only.

But this year there was Albert, who held his hand down to me and pulled me to my feet from behind the counter. When I looked at him, I could see he was weeping, too.

What a pair we made! A middle-aged man and a dead man, standing in the night and weeping for our loves.

"Is that why you cry, Albert?" I said, brushing away my own tears and sniffing like a schoolboy, not really talking to him but simply giving voice to my morbid thoughts. "Because you'll never see Maggie again? Like I'll never see my little Karen?"

Albert turned away.

But there had been something there, something that froze the tears on my face and stopped me, suddenly. Something between derision and pity. From a zombie.

"Albert?" He had disappeared down the rows, and I glanced up and down them in the darkness, trying to find him, to know what that look meant.

I found him standing between the breakfast cereal and cookies, looking at a spot, hidden in darkness, high on the wall, weeping furiously.

"Albert, what are you seeing? Tell me, please."

His lips, I could see now as the moon slid through the window, were moving though no sound escaped from them. I leaned closer, straining with both eyes and ears, trying to decipher the movement of his mouth, and I recalled Barb's story of the day before. It was easy to see after that.

"Maggie," he whispered over and over. "Maggie, Maggie."

"What do you see, Albert? Dammit, tell me." My voice was a desperate whisper. "I have to know."

And, impossibly, he answered me. A zombie, a being that supposedly could not speak, who felt no emotion and did only what he was told, answered

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me, told me what he saw, what I think they all see. And know I knew why the zombie wept, and why all of them, as we would now if we followed them at night or into their private places, wept. Albert just couldn't control it as well as the others, couldn't keep it inside, the pain and despair and longing that sprang from the curse of the zombie, trapped between two worlds and seared into silence.

"Heaven," he said. "I see Heaven."

I stand in the dark. Albert's not with us anymore; no zombies are, not after what I learned about them. Not when I know the pain they're in. And yet...

So I'm alone in the dark, and the knife's blade glints coolly in the moonlight that falls in strips of light and darkness through the pulled blinds. I've left a note for Gwen, so she won't be surprised when she comes down to the store; she'll be shocked, angry, disgusted, alone, but she'll know what to expect, lying in the aisle between breakfast cereals and cookies.

Through the heart will be fastest, easiest, least messy. It needs to be quick, so that the brain shuts down automatically; I've read that much, at least, about zombies. People whose brains have been physically damaged never come back, and there's some evidence that lingering deaths are less likely to return. A gun would be quickest of all, I guess, but I can't leave Gwen with that.

The best of both worlds. I'll come back — somehow, someway — and so I'll still have Gwen, still have the sight of her that I've gloried in since the day we met. And when I can bring myself to look, with a zombie's sight, over the threshold, into Heaven or whatever you choose to call it, into the place that Albert looked and saw his Maggie, I'll see my Karen, my little girl. And I'll whisper her name at night, and weep in solitude so that Gwen will never see the tears on my cold cheeks, will never know and never be tempted to follow me to the borderlands.

I raise the knife, and I'm weeping already.

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SCIENCE

JANET ASIMOV

CRAZY FOR TREES

THIS SCIENCE essay should have a sensible title like "A Personal Predilection For Large Woody Perennial Plants," but I have decided to confess. I am indeed crazy for trees, perhaps because my ancestors were illiterate hunters in dark northern forests while civilization was progressing in sunnier climes, or because I was born in the Appalachians and became imprinted by wooded hills that in summer are green and in winter look like hunched up Siamese cats.

Forests — and getting lost in them — figure heavily in human literature, especially in the north. Tolkien gave us those marvelous Ents, but perhaps he'd once been traumatized by being lost in the woods, for he also gave us Mirkwood. If lost, you can always hope there'll be moss on the north side of trees, but now science has come to the rescue. You can buy the — so far — expensive Global Positioning System Receiver that simultaneously tracks signals from three U.S. satellites, triangulating the results on the Receiver's screen to show the longitude, latitude and altitude of your position.

Individual trees matter too, for beauty, shade, fruit or nuts, because Great-grandfather planted them or Washington sat beneath them, or because they are good to climb. I climbed trees so much in my childhood that my relatives decided I was part orangutan, which makes it seem odd that I have lived in Manhattan for over forty years and that I married a man who never climbed a tree in his life.

But my apartment overlooks the trees of Central Park, and my late husband was uncomfortable away from the East where, as he put it in his scientific way, hills are "fuzzy."

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Earth has not always been fuzzy. Nearly four and a half billion years ago the Solar System (capitalized because it's *ours*) condensed out of the huge cloud resulting from a first-generation star's supernova. The third planet to clomp together was our Earth, barren of all life — as devoid of greenery as Mars and Venus are today.

In fact, Earth imitated Dante's* hell — desolate, wracked by winds, and painfully hot. It also had the added attraction of frequent big and little impacts from comets and whatever loose chunks of rocky matter were hurtling around.

The comets and outgassing from volcanoes provided Earth with an ocean that would have cooled the planet except that the continued bombardment kept creating heat and the increasingly dense atmosphere of stuff like methane and carbon dioxide produced a greenhouse effect. Earth stayed hot for about 600 to 700 million years.

Scientists used to think that anaerobic bacterial life began only after the bombardment stopped 3.8 billion years ago, the date of the first bacterial fossils in rocks. Now scientists think that life started much earlier, about 4.2 billion years ago, the beginning of the long Paleozoic Era of Earth's history.

All the early life that lived on Earth's surface must have been wiped out during the bombardment, perhaps many times, but life continued in ocean depths, in volcanic vents, and in deep rock. Bacteria similar to the earliest forms of life still inhabit those places today.

When Earth quieted down and began to cool, life proliferated. Soon overpopulation made the bacteria run out of their food — the organic matter that had been brought to Earth by those impacting comets and asteroids. Fortunately, some of the bacteria had invented photosynthesis, which made it possible for them to use sunlight in the new process of *making* organic matter from inorganic molecules.

A side effect of photosynthesis was the "pollution" of Earth's atmosphere with oxygen. Life handled this by switching over to an aerobic style, and evolution galloped on.

Since I'm writing about trees, I must zip by the development of multicellular organisms, differentiating into the photosynthesizing ones with chlorophyll (plants) and the predatory ones that ate plants and each other (animals).

Then life invaded dry land. Judging from the fossils of tubular microorganisms found in Arizona rocks, this happened about 1.2 billion years ago.

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The invasion sequence probably started with cyanobacteria, followed by primitive plants called algae, and then invertebrates like arthropods and mollusks. No trees. Earth was getting fuzzy, but very close to the surface.

Researchers from the University of Wales have found fossils of a 400 million-year-old plant called *Cooksonia pertoni*. This plant had thickened tubes that may have helped it rise a little above the surface and compete better for sunlight.

Eventually genuine vascular plants evolved that could stand upright on land against gravity, sending water and food up to their tops through those stiffened vascular tubes. Plants were on their way toward the first big, single-stemmed woody ones called trees. By 363 million years ago, some vascular plants produced seeds that enabled them to colonize the land more easily, because the hard coat of seeds protects the plant embryo from dryness.

Soon much of Earth was green, developing trees as big as 90 feet high. Since I think greenery and big trees are right and proper for Earth, I was shocked by a new theory perpetrated by Thomas Algeo and his colleagues at the University of Cincinnati.

In the past, no one had been able to uncover the root — to use an apt expression — of the "Devonian Crisis." From 380 to 362 million years ago, during what's now labeled the Devonian period of the Paleozoic Era, mass extinctions removed about 70 percent of life in the ocean. Scientists suspected that the culprit might be a meteor impact similar to the one 65 million years ago at the end of the Cretaceous that wiped out the dinosaurs, but there was no evidence.

Limestone deposited in the sea during the late Devonian period contains levels of a strontium isotope that are as high as those from dry land. Apparently large amounts of land containing soil and dead organic matter were being washed into the sea from a high rate of erosion.

This tremendous increase of nutrients in the water caused a rapid growth of algae, similar to the green scum covering our lakes when too much fertilizer leaches into the water. The trouble is, algae eventually run out of food and die in huge numbers, making a fetid mess that removes the oxygen used by other organisms, which also die.

We know that a lot of algae did die in the late Devonian, because their remains eventually became compressed into the rock called black shale, of which there is a nice layer, all over the world, at the right period of time.

Algeo blames the Devonian erosion on the big trees, their powerful

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roots digging into the Earth, breaking up hard ground and rocks into smaller bits that washed into the sea along with organic matter. This was bad for the Devonian marine life, but good for subsequent land organisms that used the new soils and evolved rapidly.

Trees evolved, too. By the next period in Earth's history, the Carboniferous, amphibians wandered through extensive forests of Pinophyta, called gymnosperms because their seeds are naked, appearing on the ends of stalks or on the scales of cones.

By the Permian period, 289 million years ago, the gymnosperm Cycadales apparently produced beautifully colored seeds that must have attracted even the newest land animals, the reptiles that spread out over the big continent of Pangea, now slowly moving to the cooler north and breaking up.

The breakup of Pangea at the end of the Permian caused much geological upheaval. Volcanoes polluted the atmosphere with dust that cooled the planet; land surfaces were pummeled by winds, acid rain and floods, followed by northern freezing and less available water. Animals had a hard time — in fact, 90 percent of them became extinct, including all the trilobites.

It's called the Permian Great Dying — but trees survived, for conifers, as they do today, flourished in the cooler climate that closed out the Paleozoic Era.

The Mesozoic Era begins with the Triassic period, when animal life recovered and reptiles were soon having their own population explosion in the gymnosperm forests. It's possible that these forests were spectacularly beautiful, especially when moonlight shone brightly from dew-covered trees in the phenomenon of retroreflection — light bouncing back instead of being widely scattered (we use retroreflection when making highway safety markers).

Alistair B. Fraser named the forest retroreflection "sylvanshine," and found that it's more likely to come from trees (like blue spruce and hemlock) which have an intrinsically waxy surface or one of seasonal "bloom" caused by a coating of microorganisms. When dew falls on the waxiness its drops are spherical, reflecting light better. If the ancient gymnosperm forests had sylvanshine, it's too bad none of the animals was brainy enough to contemplate its beauty.

Braininess was a long way in the future. The world moved into the Jurassic period, but everyone's seen the movie, so on to the Cretaceous period, about 140 million to 65 million years ago.

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Recently twenty-three adult and sixteen young tree specimens of Cretaceous gymnosperm lineage were found—a grove of Australian "pines" descended from a genus of Araucariodies, assumed to be extinct and seen only as fossils from New Zealand and Tasmania.

The trees are up to forty meters high with waxy fern-like leaves, plus odd bark covered by nodules. Their nearest living relatives (not even in the same genus) are almost as odd and include the monkey puzzle tree and the Norfolk Island pine.

During the late Cretaceous there was not only *Tyrannosaurus rex* (who did not live in the Jurassic) but also a radical change in the plant kingdom. Enter the angiosperms, meaning "container seeds" because their seeds are enclosed in an ovary.

Angiosperms and gymnosperms probably came from a common ancestor that was pollinated by the wind as are most gymnosperms. Some angiosperms use wind pollination, and some are self-pollinated, but most rely on animals — insects, birds, and bats that visit the beautiful invention of the flower.

Recently one of the earliest kind of angiosperm trees was discovered to be not extinct. American botanist Andrew Douglas identified a living Australian angiosperm tree with cream-colored flowers and nuts that in cross-section are identical to 60 million-year-old fossil nuts.

There are two classes of angiosperms — dicots or monocots depending on the anatomy of veins in the leaves, the number of petals, and the number of leaves in the embryos. Most flowering trees are monocot, with parallel-veined leaves, three petals, and one seedling leaf, as well as being perennial.

Angiosperms apparently originated in Gondwanaland (Africa, South America, India, Antarctica, Australia, New Zealand) and soon spread across this huge continent with an ease of adaptation to different climates that outcompeted the gymnosperms. Angiosperms got to Laurasia (North America and Eurasia) and were soon the dominant plant form on Earth.

And the biggest. A couple of years ago botanists decided that the largest organism in the world was one quaking aspen tree in Utah that can reproduce sexually with its flowers, but has spread over 106 acres by "vegetative reproduction", sending up shoots to become trees that look separate but actually have a common root system.

The lineage of trees is so much older than ours that when you look at a flowering magnolia or a majestic beech, you see what Cretaceous dinosaurs saw. If that asteroid hadn't

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hit, the creature using this word processor might be...

Anyway, angiosperm trees have flowers, although most are much smaller than those of the magnolia. Small or not, those flowers produce lots of pollen, causing many humans to have severe allergic reactions in spring when, one after another, trees come into bloom.

Angiosperms also developed fruits that fostered wide seed dispersal because they could be borne off by the wind (as in cottonwood trees) or eaten by animals. Fruits became important to the animal kingdom, but while birds and insects can fly to the treetops, all mammals except bats have to climb up to enjoy the food in the trees — leaves, pollen, fruit, and insects.

The first mammal to climb up was probably a tiny creature like a modern shrew. After the extinctions at the end of the Cretaceous, the new Tertiary period's forest canopy became home to this mammal's descendents, the primates. In a very real way, trees are responsible for the development of our primate line.

The growing brain of primates enabled them to make extensive use of the forest's resources. According to Katharine Milton, at the University of California in Berkeley, modern monkeys eating "higher quality, more widely dispersed foods generally have a larger brain than do their similar-sized counterparts that feed on lower-quality, more uniformly distributed resources."

In the trees, it's important to have good receptors feeding sensory data to the brain. All of us primates have sharp stereoscopic vision because arboreal living requires the ability to judge distance accurately, up and down as well as forward and back. You must be able to see the space around and below the branch you're on, to say nothing of the space around the branch toward which you are leaping.

This sort of vision demands large optic centers in the brain, which also gets bigger in accommodating nerve centers for accurate muscle movement, particularly of the forelimbs, used in swinging from branch to branch. The forefeet become grasping hands, and hands not only grasp branches but accurately pluck fruit, leaves, and insects for dinner.

Primate brains went on growing to coordinate hands with vision and to manage the large number of sense impressions coming in from quick changes of location. A non-primate like the sloth developed large curved feet and claws fore and aft for hanging on branches but sloths move very slowly and are not bright.

The primate pelvic fossa widened to keep pace with the bigger

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brain, but soon became the bottleneck, literally speaking. Since infants were born early so their heads would be small enough to get through the primate pelvis, this meant a lot of baby care. Babies also had to be taught what food was good, where it was located, and how to get it. Never underestimate the necessity to learn — it promotes communication and intelligence.

Most monkeys stayed in trees, where there was food and it was relatively safe except for climbing cats and snakes. New world monkeys even developed a "fifth hand", the prehensile tail. Sometimes when I think of living in trees (not with the Ewoks, which don't look like tree-climbers to me), I imagine possessing a prehensile tail...

Well, we don't live in trees, and much is made of the fact that our hominid ancestors lived on the ground. Perhaps, the theory goes, they went back to the trees at night to make leafy beds the way chimpanzees and gorillas do now, but primarily they walked upright on the hot, dry, grassy savannah with its "islands" of trees and bushes. A savannah is not forest.

Is this picture true? Perhaps not, since it's probable that three million years ago hominid environments in Africa were not dry savannah but wet, green forest. Lucy — *Australopithecus afarensis* — lived and walked upright in what was then the wooded East African Rift Valley.

Now R. J. Rayner and colleagues at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa say that Lucy's cousins, *Australopithecus africanus*, lived in the then wooded Makapan valley, in northern Transvaal. Australopithecines lived in forests, but when they ventured out into the grasslands, perhaps to scavenge, they fell prey to predators who took their bodies to caves — where the fossils were found.

University of Zurich scientists also believe that early hominids lived in dense tropical forests, where they learned to forage and hunt cooperatively. Today, chimpanzees of the deep forest use more group social behavior in seeking food than the chimpanzees of more open areas, and they use tools in many more ways, even prying marrow out of bones with sticks.

Climate did eventually change and forests dwindled, so the first human hominids changed their eating habits. *Homo habilis* and then *Homo erectus* had bigger brains and smaller molars than Australopithecus, showing that they did not chew tough leaves but were eating more animal food. They also invented tools to pound vegetable and animal matter into more easily eaten morsels.

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By the time *Homo sapiens* walked into history, trees were no longer the prime source of food and shelter, but trees were used. Humans still climbed them to get a look into the distance and eat fruit. When agriculture was invented, fruit trees were cultivated along with grains and vegetables, while in the woods humans cut trees for fires, fences, and buildings.

We're still cutting trees. One-third of Earth's forest cover has disappeared. Soil erosion has increased. In the past fifty years half the tropical rainforests have gone. As I write, Asian timber barons are trying to buy and cut the forests of Suriname and Guyana, increasing the statistics of 100 acres of world-wide tropical rainforest vanishing every minute. Entire ecosytems are being destroyed, and will never recover.

Tropical rainforests play a huge role in the planet's climate, contributing oxygen and removing carbon dioxide. They also contain more species of animals and plants than anywhere else. As the forests dwindle, scientists are frantically trying to find still uncounted useful foods and possible medicines.

Northerners cannot be complacent. Northern forests are also disappearing from overcutting (for commercial timber or simply to make room for humans), acid rain, and global warming. According to the Royal Swedish Academy of Agriculture and Forestry, acid rain alone causes timber loss of thirty billion dollars a year just in Europe!

As living space and resources decrease with increasing human overpopulation, it's harder for many humans to look into the future — they are too worried about the present. I try to remember that human destruction of the environment proceeds not entirely from greed and ignorance, but also from some desperation about surviving, yet I can't help thinking that behind the present vocal anti-environmentalists is the greedy attitude of "let's get ours and to hell with the future."

This attitude leads to disaster. For instance, archaeologist Richard D. Hansen, at the University of California in Los Angeles, has a new theory about the collapse of the Mayan civilization in 800 A.D.

It seems that the Maya people put stucco on their floors, covered pyramids with it, and turned it into bas relief sculpture. Stucco is converted from limestone by intense heat.

As Hansen says, "You have to burn about twenty big trees and all their branches in order to make only a little pile of lime about one meter high, so they hacked down forests."

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This deforestation caused soil erosion that not only ruined ecosystems but filled swamps — destroying the Mayan source of peat fertilizer. Whether or not there were additional factors in the Mayan collapse — like war and anarchy — the ecological disaster from cutting the trees must have had a big effect.

We call ourselves moderns, and civilized, but we've had plenty of wars and anarchy. We're also facing ecological disaster from our own stupidity and ruthlessness.

But some humans do continue to study and learn in the hope of finding better ways to safeguard the environment. B.E. McLaren and R.O. Peterson, of Michigan Technological University, studied one of the intact food chain environments still left, a 544-square-kilometer island in Lake Superior.

At the beginning of the twentieth century moose arrived in what is now Michigan's Isle Royale National Park. They ate the balsam fir trees and were eaten by wolves. From 1988 to 1991, wolf population was in serious decline (probably from disease) and so were balsam trees. This is more proof that it's important to have carnivores to keep down the herbivores, or the ecosystem goes out of whack.

Two huge "Canopy cranes" with human-bearing gondolas at the tops are now in use by scientists in Panama and Venezuela. The cranes permit observation of the forest canopy, a little understood ecosystem. And in the spring of 1995, Skamania County in Washington, U.S.A. consented to the development of such a crane for the study of old-growth fir and hemlock forests along the Wind River.

Then there's Yoshiyuki Miwa of Waseda University in Tokyo. He believes that the pattern of bioelectric potentials in the trees of Japan's primeval forests means that the trees are communicating with each other. I hope he's right, but finding that another organism has characteristics like us does not seem to affect human thoughtlessness.

The DNA of chimpanzees is ninety-nine percent like ours, and their social behavior and tool use puts them damn close to humans, but humans are still killing them and destroying their habitats. If trees communicate, will we treat them better? I doubt it.

Still, there's always hope. The World Commission on Forests and Sustainable Development may be operating by the time this article appears. And as the global ecosystem worsens for humanity, perhaps more people will stop to think about what's happening, if only because caring for important fellow life forms like trees may insure our own survival.

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In the past year, Ian MacLeod has shown his versatility in the wide variety of stories he has published in F&SF. "Torkiluk," our February cover story, was a wintry horror tale. "The Noonday Pool," our May cover story, was historical fantasy. "Nina-with-the-Sky-in-Her-Hair" is also fantasy, but of a more whimsical sort.

The story grew from its first line "and," Ian writes, "the idea of buying and selling the sky. Some part of me obviously equated this with unreturned love, and it evolved into a kind of fairy story with grown-up themes."

Nina-With-The-Sky-In-Her-Hair

By Ian R. MacLeod

THE MAN WHO SOLD THE SKY came to see Max when he was finishing breakfast at the Corienne. It was after nine, before ten; his favorite time of day. The promenade below his balcony was still in shade. Everything was fresh and cool. Even Nina was out of bed after staying on at the casino late last night long after he had left. He could hear her singing in the shower.

Max picked up the hotel phone almost as it rang. A gentleman to see him, the maître d' said. Business, something to do with the sky. Max saw to it that business never reached him here at the Corienne, but still his curiosity was aroused. He told the maître to send him up and finished his coffee, watching the white parasols, listening to the sea.

The visitor was small, dressed in a khaki suit that might once have been cream, holding a panama in both hands and turning it around by the brim.

"If you're selling," Max said, mopping up the conserve with the last of his croissant, "I've probably already got it."

"I understand that you are a connoisseur."

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"Of what?"

"Of everything."

Max grunted a smile through the crumbs on his lips. It was true enough; when you ran out of specific, individual things, everything was all you had left. He said, "I warn you, if you want my money, you'll have to see my accountants. If you want advice you'll need my lawyers. And they'll both charge."

"I've come to sell you the sky."

Max scratched the gray stubble on his chin. He'd met his fair share of crackpots over the years. But crackpots were like the rest of the world; good, bad — and mostly indifferent.

"That's impossible."

The little man shrugged and made to turn back toward the door.

"Hey!" Max pushed away his breakfast trolley and lifted himself to his feet. "Don't take it like that. I'm all ears. Really, I'm all ears."

"I have a sample," the little man said, and reached into his pocket.

As usual, Max and Nina took lunch that day at the bistro down in the square. Max much preferred the dining room at the Corienne, but Nina liked to sit in the splashes of shade thrown by the olive trees. Sometimes they argued about it, but — as with everything else when it came to Nina — Max always gave in. It was a typical day here on the island. Every day was typical. The sea was shimmering blue between the white angles of the houses and the pavement was hot enough to fry, but still the young ones came and went with their jeeps and scooters, shaking the siesta by its sleepy tail. They always waved at Nina, and Nina waved back.

Max squinted at the finance pages, half eaten bits of squid gleaming like wet paint on the tin table.

Nina, sunglasses stacked on the billows of black hair, the straps of her halter white on deep brown skin, asked, "Darling, what are we going to do today?"

Max gazed at Nina. He dreaded that question. Every day, had to think up something new to keep her entertained, then try to keep up. The alternative was that she went off with the other young people, and he couldn't face that.

Peeling off his cotton sunhat to mop the freckled top of his head, Max suggested they visit the viewpoint at the top of the island.

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He said, "Won't that be great?"

"Since when..." Nina lifted her glass and twirled it to make the bubbles rise "...since when have you taken to using silk?"

"Silk?"

She nodded toward his lap. "Blue silk."

It was still crumpled in his big hands, the cloth he'd used to soak up his sweat. It still felt cool. He let it unfold in his palms like a flower, wondering what it was, some napkin he'd picked up. Then he remembered the little man in khaki that could once have been cream or white, the card he'd been given, and had instantly thrown away, the way he did with all business cards.

"Just some guy came this morning," he said, pushing the cloth back into the pocket of his baggy shorts. "Trying to sell fabric, I think. He gave me a sample and I sent him away." Max didn't add that Nina had been singing in the shower at the time, that seeing her coming out gleaming wet, all perfection in the bright perfect morning with a towel around her hair, was always enough to make his heart ache, that it was a sight he wasn't prepared to share with any other man.

Max watched Nina. He knew there was no way of telling her how much love he felt without sounding like a fool.

Nina's hazel eyes were drawn away from his and across the square by the barp of a scooter horn.

The young man pulled up. He killed the scooter's engine.

"Good morning, Sir." He flashed a smile at Max, his shorts showing the muscles of his thighs. His name, Max remembered, was Vernon.

Vernon turned to Nina. "You got back all right from the casino last night?"

"Of course. But it's sweet of you to ask."

"You know, Sir," Vernon said to Max, "You're the luckiest man on the island. You have the most beautiful wife."

"I know," Max said. He hated it when Vernon called him Sir.

"Sir," Vernon continued, "you should have stayed at the casino last night. With your beautiful wife. A great time was had by all."

"Sure," Max said, folding his paper. "But we'll look after our own lives, thanks."

"Do you have anything exciting fixed for today, Sir?"

"Well, of course," Max said. "We're off to the viewpoint, the top of the island."

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"Not to be missed," Vernon said, smiling widely through his tan. He started up his scooter. "I'm sure you'll both have fun."

That evening, Max sat on the bed at the Corienne, exhausted. The guide book for the island said that there were native lads with donkeys to get you up to the viewpoint from the carpark, which there had been, but they only took you half the way. You had to walk — *climb* — the rest. Max sighed, remembering the way Nina had scampered ahead. How the native lads had ogled her thighs.

Nina wandered out from her shower, her brown body gleaming. She was smiling, singing to herself, some popular tune with words and a rhythm and that he was too old to understand. Soon, it would be time to go out to the casino again. Max was already two thirds dressed, in his dark suit and trousers, his tie still loose. Getting ready for anything, he needed a good half hour's head start on Nina. He stared down at his shoes, wondering whether now was the propitious moment to bend down and lace them.

Nina opened the windows on the balcony to the cooling air. Max could feel the draft dragging at his skin, getting down into his bones. The sky outside was lavender pink, lavender blue, delicately serrated with clouds. Remembering, Max took out his handkerchief, the sample. He was surprised to see that that too had changed color with the darkening evening. No longer blue. He could feel the play of bruised light on his eyes and face. Perhaps there was something in what the little man had said after all — he made a mental note to get it analyzed when he got back to the mainland.

"What's that?" Nina leaned over close to him, pushing back wet strands of her hair, droplets forming at the tips of her breasts, enclosing him in her soapy scent.

"Just the thing I told you about earlier, sweet," Max said, resisting the temptation to tuck it back away in the grit of his pocket like some guilty secret. "The guy that came this morning, he said it was a scrap of the sky."

"That's impossible."

"That's what I told him."

"But it's neat, isn't it? Don't you think it would go well in my hair with the silver gray dress I got down at Mario's?"

"Sure," Max said, although he hadn't the faintest idea what particular dress she meant. But it would look good. Everything looked good on Nina.

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"Let me."

He didn't resist as she took it from his hands. She held it up to her shoulders, her face. "It smells like...like evening. Like alleyways and the seashore, flowers closing for the night, seagulls up in the air. Sunset, almost."

Max shrugged. "If you say so."

"Oh, I do. I'll definitely wear it this evening. It'll drive all the other girls wild."

And what about the other *guys*? Max thought, watching her as she did a little twilight dance. Everything with Nina had to be new and fresh — she threw stuff out when she'd hardly even had time to use it, when the scent of her skin had hardly settled on the cloth.

Max made an effort. He stooped down to lace his shoes. But he could still see Nina's perfect brown feet. He loved the curve of her arches, her easy grace, the twinkle of her toes. Was she really getting more beautiful as he got older, or was it just some kind of mist that was settling on his eyes? Twenty, thirty years ago, no woman had lasted more than a season. But now, he was down to one, and that one was — just had to be — Nina.

Oh, Nina. Sweet, bittersweet, bitter Nina. The silk chemise settled over her shoulders and breasts as she dressed. Max calculated the moment to stand up. Waiting for the aches to settle, he looked himself up and down in the mirror, the stiff black evening suit that enclosed all the looseness inside. Now *that* would never go out of fashion; the suit, something hard and dark that you could put on and tie around your neck like a shell. Pity that all the clinics still couldn't get the rest right.

Max watched Nina put on her stockings, effortlessly smoothing them up her smooth, effortless legs. What he wouldn't have given for one imperfection, something he could have in common with her. What he wouldn't give, at the end of the day, for her love. Her love. Yes, that was it, straightening his tie in the mirror as though anything would make a difference, would stop him looking as old as the moon. Her love. And, yes, he knew that inside that sultry casing she was grabbing, vain, stupid, uncaring. But he was like all the old men. For some extraordinary reason, now that the years screamed back at him from the mirror, he wanted love.

They drove to the clifftop casino where there was already music and the promise of another unforgettable night. Nina wore the scrap of sky tied back in her hair. Walking across the carpark with the salt breeze lifting from the

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faintly glowing waves far below, Max saw that it was now deep purple, playing off the soft gleam of her lips, the rosy cast of the skin. The first thing you came to through the high porticos inside was a wall of mirrors. Max tried to look away from himself as Nina turned.

"Darling." She surprised him with her arms and a warm kiss.

Max hugged her back, feeling a lifting and tightening inside his whole body that was more than anything the surgeons had ever managed.

"This thing you gave me." Nina's hand reached to the back of her head. "It's quite marvelous."

Max nodded. She was right. The cloth had the texture of velvet, dark and endlessly deep. The tips of his fingers disappeared as he touched it, were swallowed by the prescience of night.

"Let's dance," she said.

In a happy daze, he followed. The music was the same music they played here every night. The band was the same band. But tonight it was all new. Max was only used to watching from the bar, the ridiculous effect it had on the trim bodies, the graceless contortions. Now he was part of it. Nina twirled. Her dress fanned out and her body drew him into the beat. The sky in her hair grew darker as she twirled. It began to glitter with stars.

What, Max wondered, had ever been the problem with this music? The beat was straight, hard, inevitable. As he danced, he turned in a breeze that carried the scent of Nina's shoulders, her breasts and her hair, the dark open spaces between the stars. And when Vernon came up, his muscles sliding inside his suit as he called Max Sir and asked Nina for a dance, Max didn't have to say a word, Nina simply smiled and waved him away. That was the best moment of all.

Driving back, his hands and his thoughts easy on the wheel, just enough drink to make the tires slide smooth and easy along the white road through the dark plantations, Nina's hands were smooth and easy too. Around his shoulders, on his lap. She pressed close to him and the scrap of sky brushed his face. She whispered in his ear about all the things she would do to and with and for him when they got back to the Corienne. A thousand promises. And every one of them turned out to be true.

Late next morning, Max and Nina sat in their usual place at the bistro beneath the olive trees. And in the usual heat, although Max hardly noticed

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it. He felt both fresh and tired. Like he'd been for a swim and fallen asleep without drowning. Nina was humming beside him, her fingers playing absently with her blue scrap of sky, shredding it with sharp little tugs. Max watched her, breathing slowly. Her sweetness was still on his skin. I'm just an old fool in love, he thought, smiling.

The food came. The bread was fresh baked, still moist inside the crust. Max ordered more wine to go with the coffee, knowing he could drink what he liked and never get drunk, feeling this way. As the waiter uncorked the cool dark bottle, Max heard the putter of an approaching scooter. It was Vernon.

"Good night last night, eh, Sir?" Vernon said, dressed in his usual shorts, his thighs tensing and untensing, still letting the engine rev.

"Not bad," Max conceded, trying not to swallow the dust the tires had kicked up, telling himself that Vernon and his kind were no longer a threat. Nina-with-the-sky-in-her-hair had given him the brush-off. "I've known worse and I've known better."

Vernon looked at Nina. "Say, you left a bit earlier than you used to."

Nina smiled and crossed her legs, leaned her chin on the palm of her hand. "Me and Max, we had things to do."

"That right, Sir?" Vernon's grin grew broader. So did Max's. He was thinking of Nina, the way she...

"Tell you what, Nina. The lads and I — and a few friends — we're having a party up in the pinewoods. All day, up where it's cool. That's if you don't mind, Sir."

"Maybe we'll drive there," Max said. "Later."

"Pity of it is, Sir, you'd never get a car up that way. Now Nina, she could just hop up on the back here. And off we go. Holding tight on the hairpins, of course."

Max was looking at Nina. Nina was looking at Vernon. Vernon gave his scooter an extra rev.

"That would be great," Nina said. She jumped quickly up from her chair and straddled the back of Vernon's scooter. She slid her arms around his waist. "You don't mind, do you, Darling?" she shouted over the increasing sound of the engine.

"Sure, I don't," Max said.

Vernon and Nina pulled off. They disappeared amid the white houses and the sleepy noon. Max stared at his coffee, the untouched bottle of wine.

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Lying there on the bright tin table were the remains of the little scrap of sky, shredded the way Nina always ended up doing with anything that got in her hands, from silk scarves to beermats. A faint breeze was coming with the fishing smells up off the harbor. As it tugged at the fleece of blue threads, they tumbled one by one across the square, snagging in the dust like thistledown, in the patches of donkey dung, on the splinters of the bare wooden shutters.

MAX INTERCEPTED the maid and rummaged in the bin back at the Corienne to find the card from the little man in the grubby suit. He wandered the back streets of the port in search of the address. Even in this grim siesta heat, he knew what he was after. The thought kept him busy, kept him from worrying too much about Nina and Vernon.

When he found it, the sign said, SOUTH OVER EAST, TAILORS FOR THE DISCERNING. NIGHT AND DAY WEAR A SPECIALTY. It was hanging askew from one hook over a peeling door.

Max went in. The doorbell rang, then fell from its mounting and rolled across the gritty linoleum toward the counter. The place smelled both sweet and leathery, vaguely like the breeze that came out from the doors of the sweet shops that Max had never been able to afford to go into when he was a kid.

"I remember you," Max said, pointing at the same crumpled man in the same crumpled suit standing there. When he was doing business, this was one of Max's greatest compliments.

"I recall visiting your hotel suite only yesterday," the man said.

"I'm here to do a deal," Max said, brushing some of the dust from the counter and leaning his elbows down. "That, er, sample of the sky you gave me yesterday. I've decided I want a whole lot more of it...not," Max added, fearing he was in danger of losing his usual financial cool, "...that I haven't got other suppliers. But I happen to like you, and I like the quality of the stuff I've seen so far. Believe me, this is the big break you've been looking for."

"Indeed." The man gave the smile of one who has been straight through and out the other side of many big breaks. "How much exactly do you wish me to supply?"

"I'd like enough to make up a dress. And you're a tailor, aren't you?

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Perhaps you could do the whole package, although I could always get my usual people in for me if you can't be bothered."

"I'm sure I can manage anything that you'd like," the man said.

They began to talk price, and when they had settled on that, the tailor asked Max about Nina's size, which for all his knowledge of Nina's figure, Max didn't know.

"Tell you what," Max said, giving up shaping an imaginary body with his hands. "You're a guy like me, aren't you. Not queer or anything?"

"Not, I think, in the way you mean, Sir."

"Then do you have a vision of a perfect woman?"

"Of course, Sir. Why, long ago on the ferry between the islands I saw — "

" — I'm not interested in your memories. Just make it that size, and it'll fit Nina fine. A perfect woman. You understand?"

The man nodded. Of course he understood. He wasn't queer. And the dress would be ready for collection late that afternoon.

Nina came home with the evening and the salt-perfumed wind off the sea. Max was sitting out on the balcony of the Corienne, waiting. The dress was on the bed, in a large, thin, rectangular box. As soon as he'd got back with it, Max had opened it up to see inside, then left it that way. Right now, when Nina came in through the door, the colors of it were flowing across the room, making the ceiling glimmer just the way the water was down in the harbor.

"My goodness," Nina said.

"You like it?" Max asked. He was smiling, remembering all the promises Nina had made and kept last night. And he could tell now from the look in her eyes that there were more to come, many other things he hadn't even imagined.

"It's..." Nina lifted it up. There was dust and sweat in her hair and on her face, and Max saw that her T-shirt was now on with the label showing on the outside. But none of that mattered.

"Do you love me?"

Nina gave him a kiss that tasted gritty, a little like the side of the road. "Like mad."

"And what about Vernon, all those other guys?"

"What other guys?"

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Nina held the sky dress up to her shoulders and twirled. Clouds and the sunset soared out across the room. She was transformed.

They ate alone that night, down by the harbor. Max bought every table in the restaurant to ensure that they wouldn't be disturbed. There was candlelight, music, fish fresh from the boats that had come in with their keel eyes on the flow of the tide that very evening. Nina glowed. Her dress was clouds and moonlight, silver gray sails shifting endlessly on a sea of twinkling black. After the plates were cleared and they and the rough red wine had reached a miraculous balance, they danced amid the empty chairs, the photographs along the walls of cats and dead ancestors. Max kissed Nina's shoulder and ran his hands along her spine, down to the edge of her dress and beyond where her skin gave way to the blue darkness of the fabric night. It felt cool to the touch, like dipping into a clear pool. His fingers strayed amid the stars, feeling Nina breathing beneath. As the music slowed and the candles guttered, Max saw the white trail of a comet adrift along the curve of Nina's spine. He caught it like a little fish between finger and thumb and cupped it in his palm for Nina to see. She laughed in wonder and the feathery light snagged in the fall of her hair as she leaned close. And there it stayed, still curled and faintly glowing as they walked back arm in arm to the Corienne, as the night took them to their room, as they made and re-made love, as Max finally breathed every sweet salted promise and Nina lay dreaming on the firefly pillow beside him.

In the morning, the comet had died. There was only a note. *Off with Vernon and a few others of the gang. Hope you don't mind Sweet. See you this evening. Luv Nina.* The dress was curled by the side of the bed where he and Nina had tossed it the night before. Even with the windows open, the blue of it looked cheap and artificial, like the chlorine-scented color you got at the bottom of a swimming pool. Max stomped out onto the balcony, nude and old and not caring who saw him. And up there was the bloody sky, right above the bloody sea, just the same color. Tile blue plastic blue cheap fairground blue. The only difference was, there was a black patch at the corner of the horizon. But with all the stuff that had gone into Nina's dress, Max guessed that was only to be expected.

He went straight down to the car without bothering about breakfast. He

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guessed that Nina and Vernon would have gone up to the hills. Past the shining waterfalls, barefoot into the green dark. He killed the engine where the track gave way to bluish hallways of forest. He got out and sniffed the air. With the birdsong, the sigh of falling water, there was laughter. Up over the ridge.

Nina's note had been wrong. There were no friends. It was just her and Vernon. Now, that almost came as a relief — Max's wilder imaginings had involved most of the residents of the island, including the fisherman, the black old ladies, the croupiers and the saxophonist in the casino band. But it was just Vernon and Nina and a waterfall sliding down amid the dripping green. Cool and bright down the wet rocks, down the smooth buttresses of marble, down her offered breasts, down his thighs. Max watched for as long as he could bear. But he soon got the picture. Sex was like dancing to modern music. It looked stupid and ugly unless you were directly involved.

WHEN MAX finally drove back to the Corienne, it was definitely a grayer kind of twilight than anything he was used to at this season and latitude. One or two of the dog-walkers and white-flanneled strollers along the breezy promenade had paused to point out to sea, toward the dark tear at the near horizon. There was even a queue for the coin-in-the-slot telescopes beside the awnings of the beach bars. But the sun was still shining and the air was still warm, and the thing out there on the horizon really didn't look much different from a storm cloud. As Max turned up the road past the smart shops away from the promenade, he took a final glance in the rear view mirror. He smiled. A few real storm clouds were now actually gathering to join with the rent in the sky. Max pondered whether it was worth putting some music on the stereo for the few minutes of the drive he had left. Decided, no. He felt pleased with himself. He wasn't — and had never been — a greedy man. All he wanted was Nina. A little of her love.

Back at the Corienne, Nina, of course, was still out in the hills with Vernon. Max threw his package down on the bed. The little label said SOUTH OVER EAST, TAILORS FOR THE DISCERNING.

Checking on the balcony, he saw that the sky was now turquoise sapphire gray. He looked down when he heard the putter of an approaching scooter on the road below. It was Vernon, with Nina holding on tight, her head thrown back and laughing.

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Vernon saw him first. "Hey, there's Max! Hello, Sir!" He gave a jolly wave, balancing the scooter against the curb as Nina climbed off.

Max raised his hands. Nina gave Vernon a carefully fraternal kiss on the cheek. Max shrugged as if he didn't care. Then — moving quickly for his age as Nina headed toward the Corienne's entrance — he ducked back into the room. He opened the box containing the suit. By the light of the evening, he pulled it on. Then he waited for Nina's footsteps, the sound of her key in the lock.

Nina was awed, inspired. She stepped right into his arms. Max was the sky, closing over her with turquoise sapphire gray wings. The room filled with the scent of their passion and all the colors of the evening. And the secret smells of alleyways, too. And flowers closing. And seagulls. And the bells of ships clanging as they came in on a late tide toward the harbor.

Later, they drove down to the casino, dressed in their new outfits. Clothed in the night. A storm was coming in off the sea. The trees were dancing, flapping their branches like mad flightless birds. Lightning flared along Max's shoulder as he reached to touch Nina's cheek. He felt the wind in his face, the wind from her hair. When they parked the car, people were already gathering round to admire, to touch and draw away with little shrieks and laughter at the chill electric feel of the gathering storm that came off them.

There was no need that night for Max and Nina to dance. They just swayed in the ballroom. The drapes billowed. The chandeliers chattered their teeth. Max was filled with a joy and terrible power. Who cared about looks, age? What the hell could Vernon do to answer this?

The storm was at its height. He was surrounded by the grainy phosphorescence, flapping curtains, black streamers of wind. With the stars wheeling in his eyes and thunder rolling from his shoulders, he looked for Nina amid the bars and tables, and the other cringing guests.

There was no sign.

He found her eventually. After the storm had died and the others had gone home, leaving him with angry backward glances, muttering about jokes being taken too far. He found her when the first flush of morning was spreading across his back and chest.

He picked his way through scattered glasses and uptilted chairs. Out

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onto the balcony. He saw Nina, standing with Vernon, kissing. The sunrise was on her skin. So were Vernon's hands. Her dress was a shimmering pool around her feet.

Vernon saw him, and smiled over Nina's perfect shoulder.

"That was some evening," he said, "Sir."

Back beneath the leaning sign marked SOUTH OVER EAST, TAILORS FOR THE DISCERNING. NIGHT AND DAY WEAR A SPECIALTY. Through the doorway with the bell that tinkled and fell off, then rolled across the floor.

"How much of the sky do you have?" Max asked. "You must keep a stock — otherwise why bother to advertise? And don't call me Sir."

"I'm sorry. It's merely a politeness that most customers prefer."

"Stop stalling, and give it to me."

"What?"

"Everything. Everything you've got."

Max was in no mood to argue. But the little man nodded anyway, and as he went off behind the bead curtain, Max realized that he still hadn't asked for payment, hadn't even mentioned a price. Max decided that he must have signed up to some system of credit without realizing, even though that would have been totally unlike him. And he realized when he had spoken that his voice was high and uneasy, that his hands and eyes couldn't settle. He was breaking the first rule of business, which was also the first rule of life: Never Give Yourself Away.

But, even after leaving the shop, there was still so much to do. First, Max went to the bank. The manager seemed surprised at the amount he wished to withdraw, but not wildly so; he'd grown used to the whims of the rich and elderly on this island. Then Max drove down to the harbor, where those who made a conspicuous show of their wealth kept their yachts moored. He walked past the gangplanks, the lounging bodies and the flaccid flags and the bright brass fittings and the hissing champagne, until he found the largest ship, the whitest ship, a great solid ghost of a ship, the one with the widest spars, the tallest masts, that creaked and glowed on the polished water. The owner was an old man like himself, surrounded by riches that had worn so thin that he could barely see or smell or touch them. Max made an absurdly high offer for the yacht, then several higher still. Eventually, they settled.

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Max climbed back into the car and drove up from the harbor to the old boatyard that lay in the wooded bay across the hill beyond town, where the scents of freshly cut wood and tar carried on the air. The hammerings and the planings ceased as his fat tires scrunched the shingle. The weathered men gathered around him, grinning, rubbing sweat from their eyes. They shook their heads at his request, and at the money he offered. They told him it was simply too difficult, and that there wasn't enough time. Then he offered more money. So much that the men began to look afraid, to make the sign of superstition against the evil eye. So much that they had to agree, and promise on the souls of their mothers that the yacht would be ready to sail by midnight.

Max arranged for all the cloth he'd ordered from South over East to be delivered to the yard. And he told the men that he wanted her re-christened. A simple paint job. He wanted Nina-With-The-Sky-In-Her-Hair.

Max sat in the bistro at a tin table in the square that afternoon, drinking coffee. He felt more relaxed, now that almost everything was in hand. Pleasantly weary from all that he'd done. Relaxing was usually a problem he had with holidays. He always felt more at ease when he was busy.

Max guessed that Nina would have got back to the Corienne eventually, expecting to find him curled up on the sheets there, having one of the naps that always left him feeling sour and slack and disgusted. But Vernon would be full of himself, keyed up after the soft excitements of Nina. He'd want to talk to his friends.

Max heard the chatter of a scooter coming down the bends through the slow afternoon. He closed his eyes. It was Vernon's scooter. He could tell that, even listening with his dodgy right ear.

Vernon turned into the square, and saw Max almost instantly. He pulled at the brakes. He swung the scooter round in a billow of dust. He dismounted.

"Nice day, Sir."

Max pointed to the empty chair he'd placed at the other side of the table. "Would you like a drink?"

"Don't mind if I do, Sir. Good of you to ask."

Max watched the way the young man moved. The ease. The grace. The absence of worry or thought. It made him all the more certain that he had to take Nina away.

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"I have a proposal to put to you."

"Well." Vernon straddled the chair. Stretching out his arms, he yawned like a cat. For a moment, Max could smell Nina. "Let's hear it, Sir."

"You're screwing Nina."

"I'm sorry to hear you using a word like that, Sir." Vernon looked truly wounded. "Nina and I love each other."

Max scowled at him. "What do you know about love?"

Vernon watched and said nothing as the waiter emerged from the bistro's interior and wiped the table before placing a chilled carafe of white wine and two glasses between them. When the waiter stooped to pour it out, Vernon waved him away. He tipped the dewy carafe into both glasses himself, and raised one to his face, half-closing his eyes as he breathed in the vineyard bouquet of some golden summer in the past. A summer, Max thought, when Vernon probably still had scabs on his knees.

"What I know about love, Sir," Vernon said eventually, placing the glass back on the table with a slight bang, then raising a finger and tapping his eyes, his nose, his mouth, his heart, his belly, his groin. "Is what I feel here, and here, and here, and here, and here, and here."

Max gazed at him for a moment. "You didn't point to your brain," he said. "Assuming, that is, that you've got one."

"That was uncalled for, Sir." Vernon sipped at his wine. Then he looked up, over Max's head and the branches of the fig trees and the roof, toward the sky. "Will you look at that cloud? Exactly what kind of thing would you say that is?"

Max turned and looked. Almost one quarter of the sky was dark, as though everything in it had been extinguished. It was neither night nor day — nor even truly black — but the kind of gray darkness that Max imagined lay waiting to take him a few years hence.

"It's probably some pollution that's come over from the mainland," Vernon said. "Caused by people like you. People using their brains."

Max shrugged. This was no time to argue. He said, "How much would I have to pay you to keep you away from Nina?"

Vernon looked surprised, but — like the bank manager — not wildly so. By now, Max was used to the process of bargaining, and Vernon rapidly got into the swing of it, too. As they soared higher and higher, circling and bickering like two swallows in the blue upper reaches of wealth, Max

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couldn't help wondering if Vernon hadn't done this kind of thing before. But he felt that it was incumbent upon him to offer a fearfully high price. After all, Nina was Nina. And love was love.

The two men finally shook hands. Vernon climbed back onto his scooter. He smiled and waved. Shouted Good-bye Sir over the clatter of the engine. Max watched him until there was nothing but silence and afternoon dust in the square.

He felt a shadow at his back.

Looking up, imagining wings of darkness spreading over him, he saw that it was actually the waiter, with a bill for two coffees and a carafe of wine crumpled in his hands. Rummaging in his pockets, Max found that he had just enough change left to cover it.

BACK AT the Corienne, Nina was asleep. Her hair still damp from the shower, soft as the rain. He sat watching her as the light deepened. Finally, she turned on the pillow, and opened her eyes.

He asked, "You had a good time with Vernon?"

She sat up and nodded and pushed the sheets away. Everything about her still slow and sleepy, an invitation to dream.

"But I've settled things with him now, Darling. He won't bother you again. And tonight, we're leaving the island. Alone, together. I've got a boat."

"A *boat*?"

"It's not just a boat."

"Where is it?"

"It'll be ready at midnight."

"At the harbor?"

"Yes."

"And Vernon?"

"He's a rich man."

She walked across the room. Stepped into her knickers. Reached into the wardrobe for a blue dress he'd never seen before.

"Nina, where are you going?"

"I've got until midnight, haven't I?" She pulled the straps down over her brown shoulders, smoothed the cloth over her hips. "So you'll let me have until then. Just one evening..."

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She opened the balcony doors. The darkness was settling more quickly than ever, and the sea was whispering and the streetlights along the promenade were starting to shine and the stars were pricking through to join them. She threw back her head and breathed in a way that made him think of Vernon, lifting that glass of white wine. Then she turned back to him.

"It's not much to ask, is it?"

Max spent the evening wandering the streets above the port. He didn't feel hungry, but then he didn't have enough money for a meal anyway. He found himself pleasantly lost in the back streets, in the dog-barking, litter-strewn alleys where the real people of the island lived their lives. Breathing in the cooking grease, the stale refuse, the bruised purple odor of bougainvillaea that spilled over from a tiny walled garden, he thought of the future and of Nina. Nina and the future. The future. Nina.

Further along in the darkness, he found a row of shops, their windows clouded with grime. He peered in, whistling faintly, hearing the sound of some half-remembered tune disappearing up the chill and empty street. There were pale hooked sides of pork hanging like cadavers. Beside that, a shop sold artificial limbs. Arms and legs lay scattered in display like some terrible accident. The half-tune on Max's lips vanished entirely. The wind was against him now, moaning faintly, tumbling empty cans along the gutters, clattering toward him like a huge, unseen train.

The full moon hung over the sagging rooftops. He saw that there was a place of darkness close by it where there were no stars — no emptiness, even — or any sense of space. He walked on, hands deep in his empty pockets, trying to think of his beautiful yacht, of the men he'd set to work, of the smell of paint and glue, of the great shimmering bolts of sky-sail lying on the white shingle between the seaweed and the rocks. And by tomorrow, he and Nina, they'd be swooping over seafoam toward an empty blue horizon. But the image wouldn't come. Not properly. All he saw was the dark shadowed space on the water left by sails, and the cold chasm beneath the hull, and the shade that was without color at the heart of Nina's eyes.

Max checked his watch. Past eleven. He'd been dreaming, and time had slipped by the way it always seemed to do. But even as his feet clopped on the damp steps leading down to the harbor and his hands trembled on the loose

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iron railing, he knew that he'd left it too late.

The yacht was everything that he'd ever imagined. A white dream. The starry night sky billowed and tautened from her spars, filling with a dark breeze as she turned out from the harbor.

Standing breathless in the moonlight at the lapping edge of the quay, Max could easily identify the two figures standing at the helm. Nina with Vernon beside her. They could only have cast off a few minutes earlier. In fact, Max guessed that they'd put off leaving the island until they could be sure that he'd see them. *Nina-With-The-Sky-In-Her-Hair* tacked against the wind and keeled a graceful twenty degrees, spinning a wake of phosphorescence. Nina and Vernon had seen him now, and were waving. Faintly, he could hear their voices, carrying over the restless water. *Love. I'm sorry. Always Remember. Sir...*

The *Nina* was out beyond the old lighthouse, and Max ran up the breakwater steps to watch as she turned into the wide sweep of the bay. Away from the lights of the town, the moon gleamed on the tips of the black-hooded waves. Max sat that it now lay at the very edge of the starless black rent in the sky. He saw, too, that even as her bright halo was swallowed in shadow, the brilliance of *Nina's* sails increased.

She was going fast now, cleaving the sea, entangled on the wind. And the brilliance of her sails increased as the moon and everything else began to darken. Max could still see Nina, her arm around Vernon, the two of them outlined against the grayly blazing sails. She was waving a final good-bye. It should have been a scene of beauty, yet, wrenched from the sky, the moonlight trapped in *Nina's* sails made Max think only of arid canyons, of seas of dust without air or water, of bones. Of a dead world.

As the moon was bitten out of the sky, stone by stone into greater darkness, the *Nina* glowed madly. She became a ghost ship, casting ghostly light from her sails. And she began to lean, slowed and tipped by the weight of those howling canyons, reaching an impossible angle as more and more of the moon dropped into her sails. A spar crashed to the water, was dragged roiling in her drunken wake. Another broke and stuck out and up like the wing of a wounded bird. Over the slap of breakwater waves, Max believed he could hear panicked screams. And splitting fabric, snapping ropes, splintering wood. Suddenly, the *Nina* keeled over entirely.

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Briefly, her sails boiled in the water, spreading a wake of milky light. In another moment, she was gone.

THE MORNING tide bore what was left of the *Nina-With-The-Sky-In-Her-Hair* into the bay below the casino. Max was standing on the shore, watching as his dreams came in as driftwood. The skysails lifted and fell in the rocky shallows. He waded in, and grabbed dripping handfuls of the stuff. The fabric tore like wet newspaper. The colors dissolved. Faded and darkened in the bright air. Still, he lifted a clump of it to his face, and for a moment he thought he could still detect the damp secret smells of alleyways beneath the reek of the ocean. And flowers opening to the sun. And seagull's cries. And fresh coffee on a hot tin table. And wine. And laughter. And the clanging bells of ships as they came in toward the harbor. Then he looked up, and realized that what he felt was all around him: that it was nothing more than the stirrings of the island.

He found Nina along the shore, wrapped in a shroud of sail. He chased the seagulls away, and untangled her, then turned back her head so that he might look one last time. The currents had dragged her naked, swollen her belly and twisted her limbs. Her eyes were open, glazed silver like those of a fish. Her hair was the most beautiful thing about her now. Gleaming dark and wet like something still alive.

Max wrapped Nina back up in the sail so that no one else might see her this way, then lifted her — astonished by her lightness, and by his own strength — and carried her up the cliff steps, along the empty road past the casino. On into town.

The sign said, SOUTH OVER EAST, TAILORS FOR THE DISCERNING. NIGHT AND DAY WEAR A SPECIALTY. It hung askew. Max kicked the door open and backed in with Nina. He saw that the bell had been fixed. It rang brightly, and at the sound of it, the little man came out through the bead curtain.

Max laid Nina out on the counter, and water spilled across the ancient linoleum. The sky that had enfolded her was cheap rotten canvas now. He watched as the scissors sliced it away.

"You're taking your payment, right?"

The little man sighed and smiled. He lifted a damp gleaming tress of

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Nina's hair, and began to cut.

With what money he had left in the bank, Max saw that Nina had a decent funeral. He would have arranged Vernon's too — even put them in the same earth under the same headstone — but despite searches that were organized along the coast of the island, his body was never found. A few of their friends turned up at the service, but they were nervous and embarrassed, torn between giggling and tears. Standing in the graveyard, breathing in the clean smell of the new earth, Max decided that only he and the little man in the grubby suit who stood on the far side of the grave really knew what life was about. He pondered the irony: that you had to live through to the end of things before you discovered what was important, and that by then it was too late.

When the service finally ended, Max debated following the little man, tracing him back toward the shop whose location had now slipped his mind. But the trees were bowing and the weather was cooling as he walked down between the houses, and the leaves were swirling and the shutters were banging outside the bistro in his favorite square. And he was tired.

Max sat down and ordered a cup of coffee at the table that had always been Nina's favorite, watching the waiter as he carried the rest of the furniture inside. He settled with the last of his money. The waiter scowled at him for the absence of a tip. Then Max went back to the Corienne to face the music of his unpaid and unpayable bill.

The maître d' was surprisingly decent about it all. He offered Max a job in the kitchens, which Max took. And the work was hard and predictable, and after two seasons he got to be a waiter, although the few people he had once known who still came here didn't seem to recognize him. They just complained about the service, and laughed and shook their heads in sad wonderment at the island's decline, that the Corienne of all places should stoop to employing someone as inefficient — as *antique* — as this gray old man. But Max kept busy, which meant that he stayed reasonably happy.

Every few months, he would discover that he had succeeded in saving enough money to go out for the evening, and would re-visit some of the cheaper haunts, places that he and Nina had once loved, although — even if he could have afforded it — he would never have considered going to the casino.

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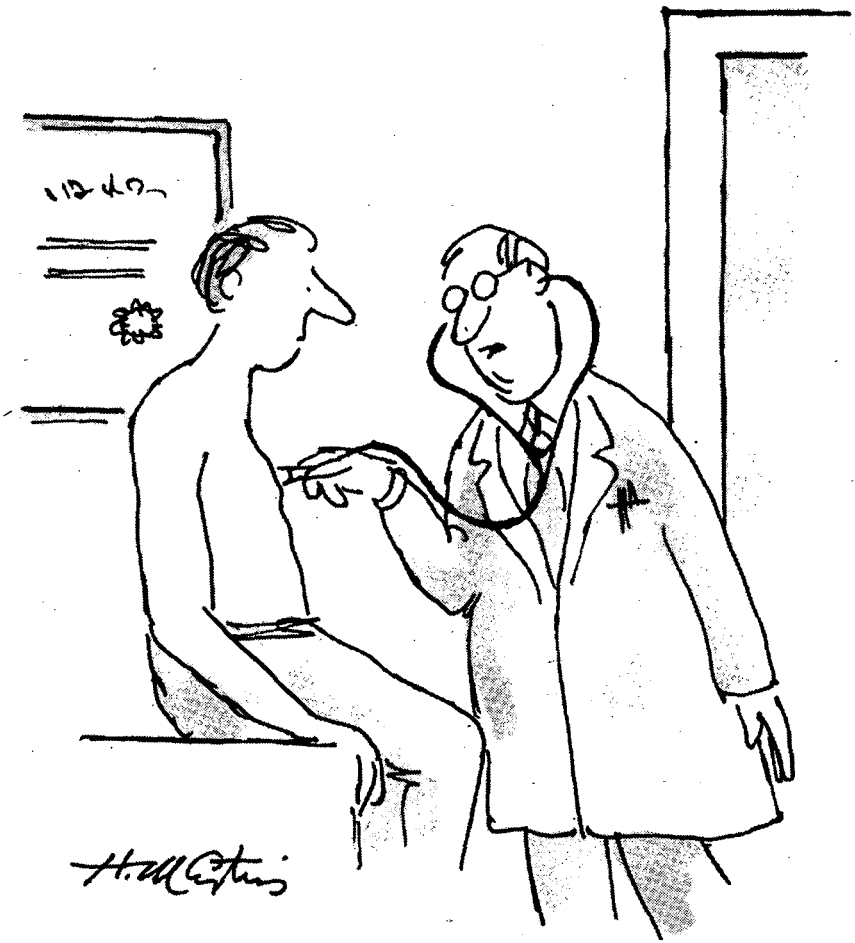
He'd get pleasantly drunk in some café, and listen to the music and watch the pretty women. Then he'd walk slowly back to the Corienne, humming to himself, looking up above the rooftops at the perfect sweep of the stars and at the bright, bright moon. On nights like that, it sometimes seemed to him that the moon had a face like Nina's, and that she was smiling down at him, wreathed against the darkness in billows of gently swaying hair.



"Odd. I can't hear your heart. Have you been to San Francisco recently?"

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We close with our cover story, R. Garcia y Robertson's "Happy Hunting Ground." The story is part of Rod's novel, American Woman, *which Tor will publish next year.*

Rod writes, "'Happy Hunting Ground' is based on Kiowa lodge tales, and 19th century accounts of the 'Buffalo War' — most of the people in it are real — they did what they said, and saw what they saw. I just put their stories together."

Rod makes it all sound so easy. But "Happy Hunting Ground" is more than a compilation of stories. It is a powerful story all by itself.

Happy Hunting Ground

By R. Garcia y Robertson

There is no general sign, except to combine the signs for DEATH, BEYOND, and INHABIT, denoting a land *beyond* death and living...

It is impossible to learn at this late date what the Indians believed prior to our advent, but I am inclined to think they always pictured a hereafter of clear waters, white tipis, and good hunting. Our missionaries have earnestly sought to convince them that there is a hell of eternal torture, as surely as there is a heaven of endless bliss. Though Indians freely admit that whites may and probably will go to hell, I have yet to meet an Indian who believes in his heart that any Indians will go there.

— *Indian Sign Language*, Capt W.P. Clark, 2nd Cav, 1884

The Iron Road

WE SADDLED UP OUR STOLEN horses and rode south, leaving Lakota Country for Indian Territory. In four sleeps we were past Court House Rock, between the Forks of the Platte, old familiar territory to my husband. Summer heat cast hazy moats around the monuments. Riding knee to knee, we talked half in Sheyenna, half in English, still exploring each other's tongues, filling gaps

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with pidgin Lakota and sign talk, acting out words, smiling at each other's antics. Yellow Legs wore a stained Medicine shirt and plain leggings. I had on my white doeskin dress, slit for riding. Each morning he braided my blonde hair, painting it red at the parting to show the world how proud he was.

Raven trailed behind us, dragging a pony travois with Nothing on board, acting the dutiful Sheyenna wife, a role she relished more than anything — except maybe the baby behind her.

Yellow Legs had that aboriginal ability to memorize ground as effortlessly as a seasoned actor learning Shakespeare, and he kept up a running commentary — not on what we were seeing, but on what lay just over the flat horizon. What the country would be like. Where we would find water. It was one of his best Medicine tricks. He pointed out hidden creek beds, and the remains of an army camp where he and Crazy Horse had gotten many American horses with the Long Knife mark on their hips — he traced a U.S. in the air with his finger.

Anything out of place got instant attention. A smudge of smoke or dust. A peculiar animal movement. Several times he saw the bones of buffalo that had not been there before. Each time Yellow Legs dismounted, piously turning the eyeless skulls to face the sunrise and rebirth, doing his part to assure the yearly return of the buffalo. On the ground he was bowlegged, from a life on horseback, but was still taller than I, taller than Crazy Horse, though not so tall as Touch-the-Clouds. I was just past twenty and desperately in love. Yellow Legs was only the second man I had ever known. He was over forty — with gray in his braids and laugh wrinkles around his eyes — but I was only his second woman, and he always treated me as something precious.

When time came to camp, Yellow Legs would look at me, saying, "Get down, wife" — a sentence not half as curt in Sheyenna as it sounds in English. "Get down" is a greeting. If a Sheyenna brave is not happy to see you, he would just as soon that you stayed on your horse. And to Yellow Legs "wife" was a term of endearment more tender than any of my names.

I was born Sarah Kilory, youngest daughter to a going-to-meeting Quaker, and a charming Bog Irish drunkard. But not even my husband bothered with my Christian name. Birth names were for babies. Who cared what meaningless sounds my parents cooed over me when I was weak and formless? Sheyenna kept hanging names on me, hoping one would stick. Not all were flattering. To some I was "That One." Or *Enutah*, "The Foreign Woman." Most commonly I was "American Woman," a name borrowed from Crazy Horse's Lakotas. Only Yellow Legs could call me "Wife."

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Unpacking my travois, I pitched my little twelve-skin lodge next to Raven's bigger one. My tipi was plain and tiny by Sheyenna standards, just big enough for me and my husband — when he came to call. But it was all mine. How often could a civilized woman say she had a home of her own waiting wherever she went? Raven got dinner going, shuffling about with Nothing on her back, doing her gruff imitation of a grizzly with cub. Elk jerky simmered in the stewpot seasoned with rose hips and cactus greens cooked soft with the spines burned off. She fanned the cook fire with a crow's wing. Many Sheyenna would not touch a black bird of death — but Raven's name gave her special powers over crows, kites, buzzards, and other Eaters of the Dead.

I served myself, not bothering to thank her. Buffalo Indians did not have, or need, a dozen different ways of saying "much obliged." To Raven, sharing stew was as normal as sharing a husband. When I first came into camp, I was a wide-eyed Wasichu, always thanking people for everything, trying to *make friends*. Raven was the one who pointed out that gushing over people for doing right sounded sarcastic, implying their natural impulse was to do wrong. Gratitude assumes a giver, not a sharer, and comes more easily to a Wasichu than to a Sheyenna.

She dipped into her stew with a chipped china cup — my spur of the moment gift during that embarrassing moment when we discovered we were married to the same man. Yellow Legs had a way of letting the medicine work itself out, and did not manage to communicate that he had a wife until I arrived in Crazy Horse's camp, deep in Lakota Country — where I could hardly stalk off in a huff. Nor did Raven get any warning. He had not told her, "I'm going to Red Cloud's Agency to pick up a couple of pounds of coffee and a skinny blonde wife." Her first hint that I existed was seeing me ride into camp side-by-side with her husband. She had yet to thank me for the cup.

Raven had round brown arms, and hips twice as wide as mine. Her raw energy could be frightening. A glutton for labor, she openly prided herself on being Yellow Legs' "working wife." I was plainly one of those silly indulgences that successful warriors wasted time with — like a parade pony, painted and primped, but only ridden on special occasions. And she did it all with Nothing on her back, or propped in the shade, watching, sleeping, waking to nurse. If the baby fussed, Raven swooped down, smothering her cries with a tit. I once asked why she named her precious offspring "Nothing."

"A special baby needs a special name," she replied.

I asked what was so special about "Nothing."

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"Nothing is special about Nothing. I am waiting for her special name to come." Pure Sheyenna — the baby was too important to have a name.

On the fifth morning we mounted up, riding south through a booming prairie dog town, filled with plump dogs, plus all the shifty types that hang around a well-to-do dog town — weasels, red-tails, and black-footed ferrets. A trio of little ground owls dived into an old dog hole as we rode by, clicking out exact imitations of a rattlesnake's rattle. Old Man Coyote and Mister Badger weren't fooled, one started to dig while the other watched the bolt hole. I broke up their joint hunt, shooing the moochers off, shaming them for hunting nestlings.

The coyote trotted a dozen yards, then turned, wearing a sly look, yip-barking back at me. Yellow Legs laughed. "He called you a meddling yellow-haired bitch."

"Really?" I raised an eyebrow. My husband claimed to understand the speech of coyotes — having learned it from a Snake boy who was raised by wolves.

"Of course — but to Coyote that is a compliment. Bold light-haired females breed good pups."

In a couple of sleeps we reached the South Fork of the Platte. This late in the Big Dry Time the river had sunk down to a trickle in its mile wide bed, a thin film of water hiding bogs and quicksands. Of course we could not use the recognized fords — where the Wasichu crossed — but Yellow Legs saw that our horses barely wet their fetlocks.

On the high sweltering divide between the Platte and the Pawnee, Yellow Legs turned loose the ponies to graze and went hunting rabbits, while Raven collected buffalo chips to cook them on. (The treeless landscape had reduced us to burning turds.) I lay alone on my travois, exhausted by the day's heat and the night's ride, slipping in and out of sleep. Then something incredibly curious happened.

Close to dusk, a coyote came trotting up. He was in no way special, looking much like the one I had seen at the dog town, a bit bigger than most, but with the usual pointed snout and graying, piss-yellow fur. I wondered if he had trailed us all the way from the Forks of the Platte, hoping for a handout. He stopped, settling back on his haunches, giving me a smug slantendicular look.

"Go away," I told him.

"Why?" he replied.

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Tired as I was, I nearly sprang off the travois. No matter how much my husband swore that prairie wolves could speak, I never expected to be talking to one. The words did not come out of his throat, but formed inside my head, clear as stream water, and in English if you please — somehow it would have seemed less outlandish if the beast had spoken Sheyenna. Too stupefied to answer, I sat up, searching frantically for Yellow Legs. No luck. He was still off rabbit hunting. Raven and Nothing were not in sight.

The coyote scratched himself, looking cockeyed at me. *"American Woman, you are the one with far to go. Come follow me."* Turning half about, he trotted off at an angle into the hot twilight — looking back over his shoulder, totally confident I would follow.

Which I did. Staggering to my feet, I stumbled after him in dreamy fashion, feet barely touching the ground. The phantom prairie wolf led me to the base of some gray rounded bluffs, strung along a stream like a row of burial mounds. Without being told, I knew the bluffs contained the Camp of the Dead. Father had given me bleary lectures about the Land Under the Hill — inhabited by faeries and the dear departed. By one of those eerie coincidences, Buffalo Indians and Bog Irish both thought the Spirit World could be found inside some high place.

A creek ran along the base of the bluffs, looking just like the Greasy Grass, the stream at the sunset edge of Lakota Country — the one whites call the Little Big Horn. A circle of men sat by the water, waiting to cross over and join the dead. Crazy Horse was there, playing poker for pony stakes with the Custer brothers — the General, Tom, Boston, and James Calhoun. With them was Bloody Knife, Custer's scout, and Colonel Myles Keogh. Crazy Horse had won all the ponies — and the 7th cavalry officers were having to throw in their clothes as well.

Men looked up from their cards. The General stammered a greeting. Brother Tom took off his undershirt, tossing it to Crazy Horse — I recognized the big American Eagle tattoo on Tom's chest. Colonel Keogh got up, giving a courtly bow; a lovely Irish gesture, except that he was dressed in just his socks and the medal from the Pope he wore around his neck. He nodded at the shallow ford where Medicine Tail Coulee climbed the Little Big Horn bluffs, saying, "Ladies first."

Shivering, I started across the ford, though I knew that death lay up the coulee. I could hear my departed Mother calling to me, the way she used to call us home. I opened my mouth to answer.

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Bluffs and water vanished, and I was back standing beside my travois. Coyote and the whole ghostly company were gone. By the time Yellow Legs returned I had firmly convinced myself it was all a mirage brought on by the heat, and my lack of sleep. Of course my husband would have none of that, blandly assuring me that I had talked to Old Man Coyote, and seen the camp of the dead.

I shut up — bizarre dreams are a Medicine man's stock in trade. Besides, the dream's meaning was frightfully clear. Crazy Horse, Bloody Knife, Myles Keogh, and the Custers were all ticketed for the Spirit World.

But I was going to go before them.

I tried to put the whole business out of my head. Some sort of waking dream, no more. Not worth bothering with unless you were born Sheyenna.

Two more sleeps and we were in the Valley of the Pawnee, finding it badly picked over, looking like a panorama from an apocalyptic gospel. Rotting buffalo lay in heaps, beneath clouds of vultures. You didn't have to be Crazy Horse to tell it was the work of professional hide hunters — skinning stopped at the hip. We passed quickly on. Not bothering to turn any skulls to the sunrise, or otherwise pay our respects. Heading down the Arikaree Fork, we turned south onto the open prairie, riding over grass turned blonde by the sun, straight into the worst of the Big Dry Time. Western Kansas is never wet — now it seemed burnt over. Buffalo wallows which usually hold the rankest sort of water were caked and dry. But each evening Yellow Legs showed us where to dig, leading us from one dirt well to the next, finding the headwaters of streams that became big rivers farther east.

We crossed the lonely tracks of the Kansas Pacific, the last reach of civilization between us and Indian territory. Relieved to put this final rail line behind us, we rode higher in our saddles, looking for signs of buffalo. Ahead lay the vast short-grass prairie of southern Kansas where buffalo come together to carpet the earth. The great Southern Herd, the largest accumulation of meat on the hoof in the Americas, would be moving north to meet us. And south of the Flint it all belonged to the southern tribes — Sheyenna, Snakes, Blue Clouds, Kiowas and Apaches.

Beyond the Flint, we could follow the North Fork of the Canadian into Indian Territory, where Yellow Legs would be on his proper reservation — enrolled and legal. Just reaching the Flint would be a relief. The Medicine Lodge Treaty had made the south bank into Indian hunting grounds. With

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war brewing between Crazy Horse and Custer, I wanted my husband on the right side of every treaty ever written. Fresh meat would be a treat, but I would have eaten raw prickly pear if it got us closer to the Sheyenna Agency.

In shimmering noontime we topped a rise and saw the Flint cutting across the plain. Between us and the river lay something that was not in my husband's mental universe — a fresh line of rails. Dark eyes narrowed and laugh wrinkles disappeared. "There was never an Iron Road here."

"It has to be the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe," I decided. When I came west to teach Indians, the line had been stalled somewhere in East Kansas. Now here it was, flung across our path, headed for southern Colorado, twin threads of steel connecting Topeka to nowhere.

The ground around the rails was dotted with alabaster mounds. Yellow Legs recognized the white objects first. His lips tightened, and I knew we were riding into trouble. Piled along the tracks were the bones of thousands of buffalo.

We crossed the tracks, and reached the Flint, watering our horses in a vast boneyard. The buffalo had been cut down as they came to drink. Wagon tracks and boot marks showed who had done the killing. When Coronado crossed Kansas his conquistadors had never been out of sight of buffalo — not for a single day — herds were so thick his army could not push through and had to march around them. But we had seen only bleached bones and empty wallows. Now we knew why. Buffalo hunters had turned the Flint River into a line of death, slaughtering the Southern Herd as it migrated north.

The Staked Plains

I WAS ROUNDLY SHOCKED, but Yellow Legs had sensed disaster as soon as he saw the Iron Road. What puzzled him was why the Wasichu would kill all "their" buffalo in a single season, "leaving nothing for winters to come?" Not a paltry question — and knowing my people better than he, I doubted the killing would stop at the treaty line. But hunters feeding the railway gangs could haul meat only so far. Spoilage alone would limit the swath cut by the Atchison-Topeka.

Putting the boneyard behind us, we pressed on, crossing the Cimarron Trail, then the forks of the river itself, entering Indian Territory. It made no difference. Dead buffalo were everywhere. Only here they were killed for

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hides alone, leaving the meat to rot. On the North Fork of the Canadian we found firepits and felled trees. Hunters had wintered on Indian land, leaving only when there was nothing left to kill. I took a moment to remind Yellow Legs he had sworn off the warpath. "Then we best not meet these buffalo killers," he replied. "My scalp shirt is trimmed with the hair of men who did me far less harm."

No longer surprised — just monumentally sad — I did my damnedest to hurry us down the North Canadian and onto the Sheyenna Agency. We were almost to Wolf Creek when Yellow Legs smelled smoke. He signed, "A small fire of buffalo chips, with bacon and coffee cooking. Maybe wolves for the Long Knives." By that he meant army scouts. It had to be an Indian fire, because I could neither see nor smell the smoke.

Leaving Raven and the baby behind, Yellow Legs and I wriggled forward, resting his brings'em-close-glasses on a bit of rising ground. He peered through — then motioned for me to look. "Two wolves, probably Delawares. A Wasichu is with them." Through his field glasses I saw two Indians in army coats. Lord only knows how he figured them for Delawares. The Wasichu with them was younger, wearing a natty silk shirt, red bandana and black bowler hat. Despite being young and out of uniform, he was bound to be in charge. The youngest, greenest Wasichu generally outranked any Indians.

Setting the glasses down, I signed that I should talk to them. "No," Yellow Legs signed back, "too dangerous."

I insisted. We had to know why they were camped so close to the agency, and I could ride down and ask without causing trouble. Grudgingly he saw the logic in that — there was no telling how two Delawares and a Wasichu would react to a lone Sheyenna. We were outside the States, on land promised to the Southern Tribes, but that might not mean a lot. Those two blue-coated Delawares were a sure sign the army was following in the boot tracks of the buffalo hunters.

Sliding back down the rise, I dusted off, went to the gully where we had hobbled the horses, mounted up, and rode cautiously forward. I caused a fair stir coming in. Both scouts grabbed carbines. The boy had a .50 Sharps, made to drop a buffalo at a quarter mile. "Howdy," I waved, feeling like William Penn preaching to the mouths of cannon. "No need for the artillery — just a friendly morning call."

Seeing nothing more dangerous than me, the boy put down his Sharps and doffed his bowler. He had dark eyes and a cocky teenage smile. "Why ma'am, you look nearly white."

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"Was when I woke up." My blonde hair was covered in dust and my face was smeared with paint to cut the sun, which was fairly relentless so late in the Big Dry Time. Dress and leggings were pure Sheyenna.

"I only knew of one white woman in these parts, an' she left in a hurry." He meant that as a joke, but no one found it funny. Not me. And not the edgy Delawares, who neither took off their hats nor put down their rifles. That I was white and a woman did not make them a whit less suspicious.

He signed for them to lower their carbines. Reluctantly they obeyed. It takes more than a pretty face to fool a Delaware. "My name is Masterson — William Barclay Masterson. My brothers call me Bat."

Dismounting, I told him my name was Kilory, and he could call me Sarah.

"More than pleased to meet you, ma'am." Bat scratched his head with his hat hand, trying to imagine what to make of me. "How can I help?" Any lone white woman was considered to be in some kind of distress.

"You could start by offering me coffee." I nodded toward his fire, acting anxiously natural. He poured black coffee into a tin cup. Real Wasichu coffee — strong enough to float nails — not the brown watery brew the Sheyenna make do with. One sip brightened the whole morning. I told him I was a Quaker, coming down to teach Indians at the Cheyenne and Arapaho Agency.

Bat chuckled at that ambition, pouring himself a cup, saying I'd find damn few Indians to teach. "The Cheyenne and Comanche have jumped their reservations. I'm scouting for General Miles, and can take you down to Camp Supply. The General can see you sent safely back to Kansas."

Not aiming to go back to Kansas — safely or otherwise — I asked if Bat had actually seen hostile Cheyenne. More people had told of Indian fights than had ever been in them.

"Seen hostiles? Hell, I fought them for three days."

"Where was that?"

He pointed his bowler upriver. "Out on the Panhandle — Cheyenne, Comanches, Kiowa, maybe some Arapaho. They had us cornered at Adobe Walls. Killed three whites."

"They just went berserk and tore into the army?"

"No ma'am, no army. Just a couple of dozen scared white folks. I joined up afterwards. Figured if I was going to shoot Indians I should get paid for it."

"What were you doing on the Panhandle?" I had a fair idea, but I wanted to hear it from him.

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"Hunting buffalo," he answered happily, "at least until that war party showed." I asked what he had expected, shooting buffalo in Snake territory. Called Comanches by the Spanish, the Southern Snakes were true blue Texans, homicidally wary of foreigners and death to trifle with.

Bat gave a wan smile. "I see now it wasn't so smart. At the start we thought it was a lark — joking about, playing Indian to scare the greenhorns. But hell, buffalo are getting rare. You have to hunt them where you find them." He swore how Kansas was picked clean, but there were still "buff" out in Texas. Lots of them. Hunters shot until their guns got red hot. Then they poured canteen water down the gun, or pissed on the barrel, and shot some more. It would not stop until the buffalo were gone.

Furious, I told him how the whole prairie from here to Nebraska was starving. Homesteaders along the Pawnee were living on flour paste and belt leather, while Bat was feeding buffalo meat to the buzzards like some crazed bird lover. Bat looked back at me like I was too long in the heat, saying, "Hides are what the railroad pays for. Can't help it about the meat." No wonder Snakes and Sheyenna tried to lift this boy's hair. They are poor businessmen — tell them buffalo meat is worthless and they will brain you out of plain frustration.

"What are Indians going to eat when the buffalo are gone?"

Bat shrugged, "I guess the government will feed 'em. This is Uncle Sam's coffee we're drinking, and government bacon on the fire. They pay me to shoot Indians. Someone else has to feed 'em. The buffalo are going. If you want to see them, you better look fast. If you want to get a buck out of them, better do it now." Such monumental extermination made the baby-faced killer reflective. "Don't know what I'll do when the buff are gone. Word's come to Camp Supply that Custer found gold in the Black Hills. Maybe I'll head north."

Right — go north and rob the Lakota. Crazy Horse was going to love this boy. Disgusted, I got up to go.

He set down his coffee, stepping closer. "See here," he says, "I am truly sorry to upset you, but it would be loco for you to just ride off alone." Bat was a boy used to having his way by force.

I handed him my coffee, to keep his hands busy; young Mister Masterson looked to be the type who practiced his draw. Then I stepped back to clear the line of fire. Maybe Bat was not as mean as he made out, just a little nervous and a whole lot green — all set to kill Indians, with an uneasy grin on his face

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and Yellow Leg's never-miss Medicine rifle pointed at his head. Bat's pistol was on his hip; his Sharps lay against a log. All he had in his hands was a bowler hat and a coffee cup — and the brave drawing a bead on him already thought that buffalo hunters belonged in the Happy Hunting Ground. His two Delawares had read me better.

He hovered for a moment, without touching me — held back by the Medicine of a Wasichu woman on the plains. Then he shook his head. "I see you're set on suicide, so you hardly need advice, but don't go down to Darlington Agency on your own." He painted a cheery picture of how the Sheyenna had finished off a pair of buffalo hunters, staking them out "with their heads propped up so they could *see* what was being done to 'em."

Bat gave me a last dubious glance, then looked down at the coffee growing cold in his grip. I must have seemed passing strange, but Bat was not a boy who pondered deeply on other people's problems. I walked the pony back to where my husband waited. We had come hundreds of dry, dirty miles to avoid the fight brewing in Lakota Country, only to find a full out war here in Indian Territory.

Nothing could provoke Yellow Legs into riding further down the Canadian. I scolded and ranted, reminding him of his promises to enroll at the Sheyenna Agency. He listened with arms folded and a wooden look on his face, the perfect image of a stoic warrior berated by his woman. Unable to beat him down, I stood fuming, watching him open his Medicine bundle and take out his black antelope bone pipe. Good move, Medicine man, but it was going to take more than a peace pipe to get me off the war path.

Slowly he packed his pipe, saying, "I know you were raised in the Jesus way — I respect that. If Jesus had been Sheyenna, he would have made a fine Man-woman, healing the sick and working in wood. But Jesus never had to worry about Long Knives coming to burn his camp and steal his women."

I was beyond arguing Bible stories. "I merely want to live in a place with no war — where we can be at peace with our neighbors."

"Is there such a place this side of the Spirit World?"

"Yes, in Indian territory. Quakers run the agency. There we could live as husband and wife — no one would question it."

He said he would like to see a place with only Sheyenna and Jesus people — but he would not go down the Canadian so long as Bear Coat Miles and his Long Knives were paying Delawares and buffalo hunters to shoot Sheyenna.

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Nor was Raven any help. "Let American Woman go alone," she advised, "they will not shoot a Wasichu." I snorted, saying she would not be rid of me so easily. Raven took my sarcasm seriously, saying she never thought to be *easily* rid of me. "Your white skin and yellow hair are like the sun on a frosty day. Because of you, our husband is no longer a warrior. Or a hard working horse thief. Because of you we must become farmers on some southern agency. But all winters give way to spring."

I told her to mind her baby, asking our husband where *he* intended to winter. Yellow Legs pointed his chin southward. "We will winter on the Staked Plains with Stone Calf's People."

"People" was what the Sheyenna called themselves — everyone else being an afterthought in creation. He lit his pipe, offering it to the earth and sky, and the four directions, then taking a puff and holding it out to me. I was not in a mood to smoke, but I touched the pipe, showing that the argument was over.

That night we made up in my tipi, beneath the buffalo robes, on a bed of living blue stem. His skin felt smooth, softer than a white man's, almost like a girl's. No arrow, no bullet, no war knife had ever touched him. I knew, because I had made a thorough study of him, going over his body by candlelight, taking him between my legs and in my mouth. Public rectitude and ease of divorce make the Sheyenna seem like casual lovers — which is no way the case. Behind his warrior facade, Yellow Legs had a craving for affection as bottomless as mine. A lifetime of living by his own rugged Medicine made him desperately afraid of desertion. In that way he was very much like a woman, expected to be everything, and secretly wanting someone to care for him.

Sharing a husband is not so bad as you might think. As the Sheyenna say, "Better to share a good man, than to have a bad one all to yourself." What I really wanted on my nights alone was a baby, a child who'd be with me every night. You'd think a Sheyenna Medicine man could perform that simple medical miracle, but so far it had been all fun and no family. What with Medicine rituals, hunting trips, his nights with Raven, and my own days apart, Yellow Legs sometimes had damn little Medicine left for me. Such are the hazards of following your heart.

We trudged back up the Canadian, through gallery forest and pokeweed meadows, then turned south into canyon lands cut by powder dry alkali creeks. Climbing past the line of cap rock, we struck out across the griddle-

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hot plains at the heart of the Texas Panhandle. Raw unyielding prairie. No trees. No buttes or mesas. Not a hint of rising ground, though I knew we were high in the air, higher than the hills at home. The cap rock atop the buttes along the Canadian formed the bedrock of these high plains. Scorched grass stretched from one end of the world to the other, making progress impossible to measure. Perspective vanished. A moving speck might be a cloud shadow, a herd of prong horn, or a rider ahead. The first Wasichu to see this tableland were Coronado's conquistadores. Fearing they'd be lost in such immense emptiness, the Spaniards marked their trail with tall upright stakes, that stood long after Coronado passed on, giving the vast expanse its name — *el Llano Estacado*, the Staked Plains.

There were few trails. Stiff wiry short-grass sprang back as soon as it was trodden on, but Yellow Legs went about the business of searching for Stone Calf's band, finding dust prints and poking through horseshit. Snake ponies ate only buffalo grass. Barley seeds in the dung meant Long Knives. Corn kernels meant *comancheros*.

The Big Dry Time finally broke. Thunder clouds gathered, lightning arced in all directions, and frigid rains blew down, bleeding the life out of the landscape. Gray-white earth turned into gummy muck, balling up on travois poles and ruining our moccasins. We ate little and slept less. Fever compounded my hopelessness. Too sick to walk or ride, I ended up flat on my back, being dragged along on a travois, seeing where we had been instead of where we were headed.

Late one afternoon we spotted figures on the plain, emerging gently out of the landscape, showing first as dots, then as three tall men on horseback. I did not need a Medicine dream or horse droppings to know that these were Snakes. At about rifle range, they vanished. We kept going, assuming they would reappear. Which they did, sitting patiently in a dusty buffalo wallow, as though we were of no concern — which meant they had scrutinized us carefully and judged us harmless. Their ponies were hobbled lying down, bony flanks heaving quietly.

They greeted Yellow Legs, then came over to look at me. Sick and bedraggled, lying on a travois, I was still an object of interest. Staring down at me, these Snakes looked as tall as Crows, skinny men with scrawny horses. I won't say I looked much better, lying on my back, smelling like a dead moose. My last bath had been in a gravel pool on the South Canadian.

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After several fitful sleeps I awoke in a Snake camp, brown dingy lodges with big ear flaps strung along a shallow arroyo. Snakes are as casual as Kiowas are formal. Your best introduction is to unpack and set up camp, watching to see no one borrows your horses. I helped Raven with her tipi, so as not to look like an utter weakling. But once the lodge was up I collapsed inside, wrapped in a blanket, feeding twigs and dry grass into the fire. Raven took Nothing to find water.

My privacy only lasted as long as it took Yellow Legs to find someone to smoke with. He sauntered into the tipi accompanied by a tall, well-built warrior with grim blue-gray eyes and the wild confident air of a war chief. Clearly a person of consequence, though the Snake political system never pretends to be anything but anarchy — Snakes follow whomever they please for as long as it pleases, exasperating both friends and enemies. I pulled my blanket tighter, and we pretended to ignore each other. A war chief does not waste Medicine eyeing other men's wives. And a proper Sheyenna wife does not stare at a visiting Snake as if he planned to pinch the silverware. Heaven knows there was no excuse to leap up and play hostess.

Yellow Legs insisted on making introductions. "This Snake's name is *Quanah*, which means Smells Sweet." For the first time since crossing the Flint I had to stifle a laugh. Snakes aren't prized for their aroma, and despite his blue eyes, Smells Sweet was all Snake. Seeing I was sick, he sent for a Medicine woman. I did not need anyone burning sweet grass over me, but it was pointless to protest — to a Snake, impulse and action are the same.

Yellow Legs and Smells Sweet smoked up the tipi, and were still swapping stories when the Medicine woman arrived. She was as much Spanish as she was Snake, and Smells Sweet introduced her as "Curandera," the Healer. I could not tell if this was a name or title — probably it was both. She went right to work, poking me unmercifully, asked with signs and simple Spanish how I felt. *Dolor? Nauseas? Fiebre?* When I did not understand, Healer acted out the symptoms.

She did not burn plants, paint me up, or put her clothes on backwards, but she did demand a full description of my dreams. Naturally my Coyote dream impressed her the most. I tried to pass it off as heat stroke, but that was hopeless. You cannot even discuss dreams with Buffalo Indians without laying claim to all kinds of vision power. The sign for "dreamer" is the same as the sign for "Medicine man," and a dream is "night-seeing" or "sleep-

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work." No one but me doubted that I had conjured up a full blown Medicine vision.

Healer signed her diagnosis. "She is Wasichu." Pointing at me with her chin, she drew her hand across her brow. The men puffed and passed the pipe, as though this observation were fairly profound. "I too am part Wasichu," she added. "There is much Medicine in the blood of Wasichu women. We do not sicken the way People do. A Wasichu can walk about when the whole camp is dying, then crumple up when the work is hard or the weather turns rainy."

The men signed that they too had seen this, Smells Sweet adding that his own mother had been white. On his mother's side he was a Parker, kin to some of the best folks in Texas society.

"She is also a bruja." Healer said it evenly in Spanish, making the sign for Medicine woman. A nice way of saying I was a witch. "Power whips around her like an unruly wind." Her hands swirled and she puffed her cheeks, blowing and making the signs for wind and Medicine. She promised I could look forward to whole new forms of dementia. Arguing Buffalo Indians out of their superstition is near impossible even when you're hale and hearty — an invalid hasn't a shot at it. I merely pointed out there was no use to Medicine you could not control.

Healer chuckled. "To a Wasichu, everything must have a use." The men laughed, saying that was certainly so. "Take care and cultivate this Medicine, it will grow." Healer's hands shot up like a corn plant in the sun. "Deny it, and it will whirl out of control, carrying you off." She rummaged through her Medicine bag, producing powders and herbs. "I will give you a broth to drink now for your fever, and stronger Medicine to help you on your journey."

I signed that she had done plenty, and I felt wagon loads better, but Healer ignored my protests. Perhaps she was merely completing her own Medicine. "These are your helpers." Healer held out four small wrinkled cactus buds. "Keep them with you. The winter ahead will be a hard one. When you need them, scrape the hair off and eat one — even though they are bitter." She combined the eating sign with a comical grimace.

I mumbled a *muchas gracias*, putting the buttons in my Medicine bag, among my herb teas and patent pills — though by now our luck was so thoroughly bad a few cactus buttons weren't going to turn it around. Then Healer brewed up a broth that seemed mostly cayenne pepper, claiming it would clean my spirit and get me on my feet. Which it did — scorching my sinuses, and blistering my gullet, then getting me on my feet and out of the

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tipi at a run. I did not stop until I was out of camp squatting among the ponies. It even burned coming out.

When I recovered from that cure, we set off again, traveling between storms. Freezing rain turned to snow by the time we found an abandoned campsite in the buttes and canyons of New Mexico Territory. From a pair of moccasin prints and a turkey feather, Yellow Legs deduced the camp was Sheyenna. We followed their trail, and one snowy morning we came upon a hundred-odd lodges pitched beside a cottonwood creek. The air was so cold the limbs on the cottonwoods cracked like pistols going off. Yellow Legs signed, "Get down." Tipi markings told him this was Stone Calf's band of the Southern Sheyenna. Our winter home.

Catherine

BY THE MOON of Frost in the Tipis, the hard winter Healer promised was here, and we all crowded into Raven's lodge to stay warm. Nothing cried constantly, tiny ragged breaths that misted in the frigid air. Raven was down with fever, so I had to care for the baby — like Healer said, I was Wasichu, likely to be up and about when People lay sick in their lodges. Nothing had diarrhea, and her rabbit fur bundling was always dirty, but there was no way to wash fur in freezing weather. I replaced the sage padding, apologizing to her for the dirty fur. At least Nothing got to have her black and watery bowel movements indoors — I had to do my business on the iron cold ground outside. When I finished, Raven took the baby to her hot breast. It was scary to see Raven so helpless; the woman who could do the work of ten Wasichu was weaker than I. I was now Yellow Legs' working wife. You could tell by the makeshift look of the tipi — our robes were ragged, the fire was feeble.

Bad as things were, our tipi was paradise compared to most of Stone Calf's camp. No one had died in our lodge. Whole bands had come into camp worse off than we were — trudging in, their feet wrapped in rawhide, having lost everything. No horses. No lodges. No warm robes. No meat for the winter. Long Knives were attacking the camps, burning lodges and winter stores. Bad Hand MacKenzie had taken a herd of captured ponies to Tule Canyon, shooting them with firing squads; a thousand horses lay in frozen heaps.

Nothing stopped crying and started to suck, a good sign. Raven still had

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milk. Tonight I meant to make bone soup, so she could get some calcium. Tucking a small ax under my blanket, I crawled out the entrance flap into the searing cold to look for firewood. Lodges stretched up and down the frozen creek, a chain of tiny snow-sided volcanoes, blackened at the tops where the smoke trickled out. The stunted cottonwoods along the creekbed were dying, stripped of their bark for as high up as a woman could reach or a pony could gnaw. Smaller branches were mostly gone, and the bigger limbs were cased in ice. Hanging among the crystal limbs were grisly little bundles dripping with icicles, the frozen bodies of children wrapped in swaddling skins.

Swinging the ax as high as I could reach, I chopped at skeletal branches, swearing that next time I would get Yellow Legs to do this. He was off seeing to the horses. The man could be a mountain of energy where horses were concerned. Every morning he dug under the snow to cut grassroots for our ponies.

I let my blanket slip, to get a good swing with the ax, not seeing the young Sheyenna until he was next to me, grabbing my wrist. I could barely believe I was being manhandled in camp, and thought he was making some fool attempt to help—a Sheyenna version of courting behavior—though this was hardly the moment for some random brave to get romantic. Then he twisted hard, making me drop the ax. So much for courtship. The grinning bastard yanked my blanket off — going right for a roll in the snow.

I gave up the blanket, grabbing my skinning knife left-handed, screaming, "Let me go," slashing his wrist.

His grin faded, and he let go, staring at his bleeding wrist. "You cut me."

Scooping up the fallen ax, I told him, "I will chop you too. Give me my blanket."

He let the blanket drop. Wind howled between us. There was a knife in his belt, but he seemed to have forgotten it, saying, "I thought you were the crazy Wasichu."

I waved the ax. "You are the crazy one. Attacking a woman in camp. Assaulting a guest of Stone Calf." I wanted this dumb brave to know he was the one in the wrong, the one who had broken the Peace of the Camp.

He looked hurt and stubborn. "I thought you were the crazy Wasichu who gathers wood for Long Back."

I had never heard of Long Back. Snatching up my blanket, I told him, "I know your face. I will tell my husband. I will tell Stone Calf. You will be driven out onto the prairie." He could stick his prick in a frozen gopher hole.

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I did not know if I *could* get this oversexed brave thrown out of camp, but it sounded good. Nothing confuses a warrior like threats that he cannot meet — especially from wild-eyed women. Now he had to worry about his standing. There were no coups to be had wrestling with another man's wife in the middle of camp.

I backed into our tipi, thoroughly shaken. It was the first time I had been menaced by a brave in camp. I had been freely threatened with mayhem and forced marriage out on the prairie, but the most miserable camp circle was meant to be a woman's haven. When Yellow Legs returned from his precious ponies, I told him to go gather the wood. "A man grabbed me. It is too damned cold to cut wood with someone going through your clothes." He looked properly aghast, seizing his Medicine gun, asking who this man was.

"No one I know personally." My husband's show of concern had me feeling better; I took away his gun and handed him the ax. "Here, cut some wood. I think it was some mistake." No reason to ticket my attacker for the Spirit World. Then I added, "Does anyone know of another Wasichu woman in camp?"

Ax in hand, he considered the question. "Someone might, but not me." He vanished through the tipi flap.

I sat back, cold and frightened. My attacker had not acted snowblind or stir crazy. He was convinced there was a Wasichu crazy woman in camp — ready to meet any man's demands. I had to find Long Back's lodge, and see for myself what the man was talking about. Raven was sick and asleep — no sense in waking her. Pulling my blanket about me, I went looking for this Crazy Wasichu. Afraid of what I would find.

People glided like ghosts between the lodges. Dead ponies and mules lay sheeted in ice, half eaten by hungry Sheyenna. Dogs slunk about, looking for food while aiming not to become a meal.

Halfway down the creek an especially thin wraith emerged from a lodge. Wrapped in a threadbare blanket, she darted over to the bushes by the stream bed, tugged wildly at the brush, breaking off frozen branches with raw hands. Her feet were mud-spattered and blue with cold, but her ankles were white. I walked slowly over. Seeing me, she started like a frightened bird, then went back to work.

The glimpse I got was harrowing. She looked crazy; her hollow sunken eyes half hidden by unkept hair. And she was definitely white. Not a white

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Sheyenna, like Kiowa Woman, but a girl born and raised Wasichu. Like me. Calmly as I could, I asked, "What is your name?"

She stiffened. With my face greased and painted against the cold, I doubted she could tell I was white. Her soft child's mouth moved hesitantly. "My name is Catherine."

Shivering, she went back to ripping at the brush, frantic to tear off a few twigs of firewood. I bent down to help her, drawing my heavy knife, chopping at the branches. "How did you get here?" A dumb question but I had to ask.

She gaped at me. "I was captured."

"Where?"

"Far away. Up north. In Kansas."

We sure as hell weren't in Kansas anymore. She looked around, then bent down and bundled up her sticks, scrambling back toward the tipi she came from. Turning, I saw two men coming, not fast, but with easy confidence. One was the warrior who had grabbed me. Seeing the girl disappear into the tipi, they sat down a couple of paces off. When I stared, they turned their heads politely away. Going to get Yellow Legs, I kept looking over my shoulder. They sat on the ice hard ground, like Old Man Coyote and Mr. Badger covering the exits to a prairie dog hole, waiting for the poor creature to emerge.

Yellow Legs was back in the lodge, sitting proudly beside an immense pile of twigs. I told the whole terrible story, begging him to go to Long Back's lodge to try to get Catherine out. He could have my horse and anything else Long Back might want in trade. Yellow Legs took his pipe and left.

Raven was awake. After a long silence she spoke up. "It would be good to have another woman in the lodge, now that I am so weak. But we need your horse too."

I snorted. It was not as if we were riding anywhere. "I want that girl out of Long Back's lodge because she is being horribly mistreated. Men in camp are raping her."

"Some men will do that," Raven acknowledged. "It is a part of men's Medicine I never understood."

"No," I snapped, "it is not men's Medicine. It would be men's Medicine if they were raping each other. You would not accept it if she were Sheyenna."

"If she were not Wasichu, you would not be so worried."

Sweating and shaking beneath her buffalo robe, with her pitiful thin baby at her breast, my sister-wife was still full of fight. I thought of the men I had seen so set to kill; Bat Masterson, with his blind certainty, Crazy Horse and

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Custer with their smug warrior ethic. None of them were out here on the Staked Plains, gathering wood barefoot, being raped while they worked. Both sides boasted how they fought to protect their women, yet hardly a brave or soldier had died in this buffalo war. War parties fought when they felt inclined, while the army blundered about, raiding villages and peace camps — pushing women and children into the front lines.

I told Raven, "Every camp makes its own Medicine, and the Medicine in this camp is terrible. Raping girls will not make it one whit better. No wonder children are dying." It was true. If you believed in bad Medicine, it was no surprise this was a death camp.

Yellow Legs entered, sitting down at the back of the lodge, dim flames lighting his dark features. "I smoked with Long Back. He is happy with his new woman, who fetches wood well enough — though she is weak and cries at night. He says he does not need horses, though I offered him my war horse and my best buffalo ponies. Long Back would of course prefer a proper woman, a Ute perhaps, or even a Mexican — but no one is offering one. He said to come when the grass was up, or there are buffalo to hunt. Then he might need more horses and fewer women."

Yellow Legs stared straight into the fire, then went on, "Long Back wondered why I wanted such a weak and clumsy woman. He claimed some men in camp were curious about how it felt to copulate with a Wasichu. He himself was not curious, being very happy with the wives he has. But to show he was generous, Long Back said I could take her out and copulate with her. I told him I was not curious."

There it was. A girl with sad scared eyes was being tortured in camp, and there was nothing to do about it. I wanted to scream.

Raven groaned and got to her feet, handing Nothing to our husband, then turning to me, "Help me go outside." I stared dumbly. "Help me go outside," she insisted. "I will talk with the women."

I helped her out of the lodge. Her flesh hung loose, but the frame beneath was still strong. She went first to a hollow in the creek bank, squatting in the snow with her dress pulled up. Frigid wind sang down the creekbed. From the color of the snow in the hollow the whole camp had diarrhea. Only the cold kept us from stinking clear to California.

When she was done we hobbled along the line of tipis, stopping at a big smoke-darkened lodge. Raven scratched at the entrance flap. We were

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ushered in by a wrinkled old scarecrow named Yellow Hair, the mother of a war chief called Medicine Water. With her were two sisters, Two She-Wolves and Stands Apart. Throughout camp families were doubled and tripled up.

We traded news. The sisters told how Gray Beard's camp had been raided by soldiers riding in wagons. Few were killed, but everyone lost food and lodges. Two She-Wolves and Stands Apart had brought their daughters to Stone Calf's camp hoping to find things were better — by now they knew things here were almost as bad. Yellow Hair had trudged all the way to the Agency, but what she saw there sent her scurrying back to the Staked Plains. "Long Knives are taking away guns and ponies, locking people in corrals with only trash to eat."

More women came in, and half the stories had to be retold. The newcomers included Yellow Hair's daughter-in-law, Medicine Water's wife, a giantess with angry eyes called "Buffalo Calf." She must have grown some since her parents named her. "Buffalo Cow" would have been closer to the mark. I kept my blanket pulled up, saying nothing, waiting to see what Raven had planned. My sister-wife sat beside me, breathing softly, summoning her strength. Finally she spoke. "I heard there is a Wasichu in Long Back's lodge."

This non-question was directed at no one, but Buffalo Calf spoke up, saying that in the Big Dry Time she went with her husband to get revenge for the buffalo. They crossed the Flint, going as far as the Fat River, ticketing about a dozen Wasichu off to the Spirit World. Buffalo Calf only discussed those killings she had a hand in, but when she did her eyes lit up like hellfire, and she went into unnecessarily grisly detail, mimicking the sound an ax makes when it splits a woman's skull. At no time during this amiable romp was Medicine Water's war party in the least inconvenienced by Bear Coat Miles' cavalry, or the army garrisons in southern Kansas. The way war parties moved invisibly over the prairie helped make war on the plains so terrible. Baffled by the braves' invisibility, the army would attack the villages, turning the whole brutal show into an innocent-killing contest.

Eventually Buffalo Calf got around to telling how Catherine's family was massacred — an easy stroll from the nearest army camp. Catherine and three younger sisters had been brought south, along with the guns and horses that signified a successful killing spree. Two She-Wolves and Stands Apart added to the story, saying the two youngest sisters were left behind when Gray Beard's village was attacked. The little girls were given to a boy, who left them

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sitting on a buffalo robe for the Long Knives to find. No one knew the boy's name, but I thanked God for him. He could as easily have killed the girls — even wars of atrocity and annihilation have their heroes.

Raven spoke up again. "The one that is with us should go back with her sisters. She is bad for the camp Medicine. Men have been forcing her to copulate. Such things can happen among Utes and Crows, but we are People."

"She is not a Ute or Crow," retorted Buffalo Calf. "She is a Wasichu, a crazy woman who does not say no." Several others agreed, as if that explained it all.

But Raven refused to be put off. "If she is crazy, she does the camp no good."

Buffalo Calf glared at us from her place in the back of the dark tipi, making my face paint feel pretty thin. "You are northerners and may not know how we suffered. In the winter when White Antelope was killed, we made a peace camp in the Big South Bend, near to the Long Knives' fort. The Long Knives came anyway, raping and killing."

This was Chivington's Sand Creek massacre. We had passed Sand Creek on our way south, but Yellow Legs would not go near it — "Too many ghosts." Buffalo Calf had hidden in the snow, watching Chivington's troopers drag women and children from her tipi — "I saw three aunts and five sisters taken by the Long Knives. They copulated with the older ones, then killed and scalped them. A Long Knife chief took out his pistol and shot the little ones, one by one, while they screamed for him to stop. My whole family was murdered — but even that did not make me crazy." Maybe not crazy, but awful darn close. One look into Buffalo Calf's eyes told the whole tale. She was never going to forgive Catherine's people, not while they were still busily destroying her tribe.

Two She-Wolves and Stands Apart said they too had fled the Sand Creek camp with their daughters. "We would have died in the cold and snow, but a coyote took pity on us. He caught hares for us to eat, and guided us to Gray Beard." Cynical as he was, even Old Man Coyote found winter war tough to stomach.

"Yes." Raven shivered. "But that was many winters ago, and even a coyote can have pity."

"A coyote can have pity," Buffalo Calf agreed, "but the Wasichu do not. If we have pity on this girl, will they have pity on us?"

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I wanted to shout, "Yes, of course we would" — but I knew the answer was most likely no.

"It would be better for People everywhere if this crazy girl never leaves the Staked Plains," reasoned Buffalo Calf. "If she lives they will use her words against us. And if she dies they will treat us no worse."

Buffalo Calf was actively hateful, but most of the others just had more immediate problems. Two She-Wolves and Stands Apart had their own daughters to protect — there was no promise that the Long Knives would not rape them. They *knew* what had happened at Sand Creek. And Yellow Hair's son was dead sure to be jailed or hung, even if Catherine were handed over healthy, unhurt, and made into an honorary tribal princess.

But bless her stubborn heart, Raven would not give in. "I too have a daughter," she told them. "I do not want her to die on the Staked Plains. We are not Snakes to live on what the coyotes leave — the young and weak must go in to the Agency. And they must have this girl, to trade for food and blankets." My sister-wife was coldly clever, driving a wedge between Medicine Water's family and the rest of the women. Yellow Hair had admitted that Medicine Water was likely to be hung no matter what. Raven held out the thin chance that by bringing in Catherine the others might get sympathy — slim odds to be sure, but Stone Calf's band was hard up for hope.

"Medicine Water is a warrior," she reminded them. "No one hounded him into going north, saying he must kill this girl's family. He chose the bow; for that we feed and honor him. But we do not shield him behind the bodies of defenseless ones." One by one women agreed to ask Stone Calf to lead them back to the Agency — with the captives. Medicine Water would fight on all the better with only warriors to feed.

We return to our tipi. Tiny rivers of ice ran down the sides of the lodge from frost melting around the smokehole. Nothing was crying. I pulled back the entrance flap, waiting for Raven to worm her way in. The walk and talk had weakened her — but she had showed me the proper line to take with the Sheyenna. I owed her for that.

Yellow Legs looked godawful relieved. Swiftly handing the baby to Raven, he sat back in his seat of honor at the rear of the tipi. Stoic courage and a Medicine gun cannot stand up to a sick child. I settled into the wife's place nearest him. This terrible winter had put new lines in his face, but I was going to have to add to my man's burdens. I told him we had to take Catherine's case to Stone Calf.

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"Cath-er-ine." Raven drew out the Wasichu name, which meant nothing in Sheyenna. "If she were a Ute or Pawnee, you would not be so concerned."

I was tempted to say the Christian thing, to swear I would be just as concerned. But winter on the Staked Plains stripped you of pretense, leaving little in the way of hope or hypocrisy. Raven deserved the truth. A Ute or Pawnee girl in Catherine's place would provoke compassion, but not the same urgency. Only snakes shed their skins. Catherine was white like me and never meant to be here. "She is Wasichu," I admitted. "That is why Long Knives and Buffalo Soldiers will come for her with wagon guns and many firing rifles. Do the Utes have wagon guns? Do you want your people broken like the Pawnee?"

Yellow Legs sighed, picking up his Medicine bundle. "We will speak to Stone Calf." He hated to have his wives fighting. Polygamy is not all frolicking under the buffalo robes — just ask a Mormon.

In the peace chief's tipi I sat on the women's side, and Yellow Legs went to sit with the men. Stone Calf's wife, a woman with wide-set intelligent eyes and a proud pointed chin, served us token bits of dried mule, showing her husband was still a chief, even among beggars. Stone Calf looked as if he had aged twenty years in a single winter. Dog Soldiers and war chiefs had threatened to shoot his ponies. His son had thrown his life away fighting the buffalo hunters. Still he stood for peace and reason, sending runners to the agency, asking the army for terms. The answer was no terms. An unconditional surrender. No protection for the buffalo. No punishment for the hunters who had robbed the Sheyenna. Just reprisals against anyone who had left the agency.

I studied the worn edges of my long winter moccasins. Plainly the army aimed to crush the southern tribes. Sheyenna, Snakes, and Kiowas were going to be pinned to the agencies, while buffalo hunters destroyed what remained of the Southern Herd. The great pulsing heart of the southern plains would be stopped forever. Not everyone was as resigned as I was. Cloud Chief had come back from raiding into Texas, bringing guns and horses. More ponies were on their way from Mexico. Howling Wolf wanted to raid the Wichitas for guns. There was still talk of war when the grass was up.

But Stone Calf doubted many would live to see grass in the spring. "Tall Bull has already taken his family in — when a Dog Soldier goes in, it must be

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near the end. Only fear of what will happen at the agencies holds us back." At Anadarko, Long Knives and Buffalo Soldiers had opened fire on the Snakes and Kiowas who came in to give up their guns and be counted.

This was my moment. Only I could pretend to speak for the Wasichu. But the unvarnished truth was not going to do anyone any good. Not Stone Calf. And certainly not Catherine. So I settled for fraud instead. "Go in," I told them. "Take Catherine with you. Bring her in alive and they will give you food. Enough to keep you from starving." Hell, I could have promised them hump ribs, heated lodges, and repeating rifles — it wasn't conscience that held me back, but respect for their natural cunning. By now they knew us rather well.

"Do you really think this?" Stone Calf looked at me.

"Certainly," I lied, "they are bound to treat you better if you bring her back, and treat you worse if she dies. We Wasichu care about our children too." Silently I cursed myself — one more well-meaning Wasichu making promises we would not keep. We were not going to stop killing off the buffalo, or whittling down the reservations, or cutting back on rations — not out of thanksgiving for the return of one poor white girl. Catherine's story would only confirm white opinion. Buffalo Calf had realized that much, without being particularly sensitive to the Wasichu way of thinking.

But my brand of humbug was what this old chief wanted to hear. Stone Calf stood up and announced, "I will go to Long Back. Those who want peace can come to the agency with me. Those who want war can stay on the Staked Plains."

Someone had to say "no" to the fighting — *the war stops here,* come what may. If my lies gave Stone Calf the ammunition needed to end the shooting, so be it. I would take whatever punishment providence dished out.

I do not know what Stone Calf told Long Back and the others but he returned with Catherine and her sister Sophie, who had been with Gray Beard's band. He put them up in a lodge next to his. In that lodge I learned enough of Catherine's story to know I did not want to hear all of it. Her sister Sophie was a few years younger, and treated rather better, but what she had been through was suitably horrible. Stone Calf led the trek toward the Agency, heading into the sunrise. Almost everyone followed. Even Buffalo Calf's tipi came down; Medicine Water was coming in. All the talk of fighting when the grass came up was just talk. Even the worst Wasichu haters were sick of bark broth and pony steaks.

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At the edge of the Staked Plains we met some Blue Clouds coming the other way, climbing past the cap rock. The Blue Clouds had stayed resolutely out of the war with the buffalo hunters. "Everyone loves the Blue Clouds," was their boast. Lakotas called them "Wanders-Under-the-Cloudless-Blue-Sky." Somewhere or other they had picked up the name Arapaho. Squawmen liked them because their women never seemed to say "no" — a tribe so good-hearted, one sign for them is to touch the left breast. But these Blue Clouds claimed Long Knives had come to Darlington carrying a paper with names on it. Everyone whose name was written on it was taken away. Hearing there were Blue Clouds on the list, they lit out for the Staked Plains — without even finding out if the braves on the list would be hung, or merely locked in stone lodges. For people used to wandering under the blue sky, being buried alive or buried dead was a thin difference.

Naturally the Sheyenna wanted to know if there were any Sheyenna names on the paper. The Blue Clouds signed, "The Long Knives would not let us look at the paper, nor can we read their words." They neatly mimicked the act of writing to make the meaning clear. "But they spoke of one Sheyenna, a chief they especially wanted." They made the sign for rock hard, then for buffalo and birth — together they meant "Stone Calf."

We were aghast. The Blue Clouds hesitated, then signed, "They claim he copulated with two female captives." Blue Clouds copulate pretty freely, and they seemed puzzled that the Wasichu would take this seriously. Several Sheyenna braves looked uneasy. I wondered if they had satisfied their curiosity on Catherine, and now regretted being inquisitive.

Stone Calf was unshaken. He was taking Catherine and Sophie to the agency — a chief must be ready to sacrifice everything for the good of the camp. I myself was sick, seeing how seriously I had misled the friendly old peace chief.

Later, in our tipi, I explained the gruesome sense of it to Yellow Legs. "Stone Calf sent runners in saying he took the girls into his lodge. We Wasichu think that no chief would keep a young white woman except to copulate with her." By offering protection, Stone Calf had singled himself out for punishment. I promised to speak for Stone Calf. And Catherine would tell how he saved her. I pictured Catherine telling her story to some officer's wife — a tea party I did not look forward to.

Yellow Legs stared straight ahead, hardly showing he heard me. "It is good you will talk for Stone Calf, since I will not be there."

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"Why not?"

"I am staying here on the Staked Plains."

In times past I would have torn into him, reminding him of his promises. Now I could summon neither the energy nor the conviction. My pleasant little dream of a horse ranch in Indian Territory was swept away with the buffalo. Everyone who had been to Darlington agreed the agency offered only idleness and short rations. I merely pointed out that Raven and Nothing were too weak to winter on the Staked Plains.

"That is why you must take them into Indian Territory."

It shows how bad things were that I did not shriek at the notion of going off with Nothing and my big difficult sister-wife. I merely went, "Whoa?" in surprised Wasichu.

"I was a warrior." Yellow Legs spoke gravely, as if this were somehow news to me. "I have not touched the pen since Medicine Lodge. My name may be on the paper that the Long Knives are carrying around." Not an impossible thought. He was a well known warrior off his proper reservation — and the army was clearly using this buffalo war to round out old scores. "But my family must go safely into Indian Territory. If you ride in the lead the Long Knives would let you through."

I had never thought of Raven, Nothing, and me as a family, but I suppose the idea came naturally to him. It was neatly laid out. I could go straight to the Quakers, taking Raven and Nothing with me. They were Northern Sheyenna — no relation to Stone Calf's renegades. With a white woman to speak for them they should be utterly safe. No matter how I turned it about, Raven, Nothing, and I needed to go. He needed to stay.

We had figured in everything except my sister-wife. The woman whose health we were so concerned about listened dutifully to her husband — then refused. Raven was not leaving him. Not this side of the Spirit World. She thanked us for thinking of her, but she was not about to waltz off to Indian Territory with me for company. Starved, sick and exhausted, facing the death of her child, the woman was twelve times more stubborn than I could ever aspire to be.

So what could I do but stay? I had no desire to go on alone into Indian Territory, to take part in what was sure to be the final calamity of the Southern Sheyenna. I did not need a Medicine dream to picture the downward spiral they faced: disarmed, dismounted, subjected to disease and starvation on a steadily shrinking reservation. No ma'am, life is precious, but not to be

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bought at that price. We ended up sitting in front of Raven's tipi wrapped in whatever would keep us warm, barely speaking, watching Stone Calf's people march off in a straggling line over the snow. With hardly any horses and pitifully few possessions, the Southern Sheyenna were disintegrating even as they crawled in to surrender.

Catherine and Sophie walked with Stone Calf's women, behind the peace chief. It is impossible to imagine two more different people than Catherine and Stone Calf; one was a man, a hunter, a warrior and statesman, old and respected, who had spoken out for peace at Harvard College and at the Sundance councils. The other was an orphaned girl in her teens, despised, abused, and generally considered crazy. Yet each held the other's fate. Stone Calf had made himself Catherine's protector, and Catherine had become his alibi. If there was no new war when the grass came up, white families from Kansas to Mexico had Stone Calf to thank. But all the Wasichu would care about was Catherine's story — she alone could save Stone Calf from prison or hanging. Somehow I trusted them both.

The last of Stone Calf's People disappeared into the damp morning, descending past the cap rock toward the plain below. The war to save the buffalo was over.

The Southern Herd

WE WERE LEFT behind in Stone Calf's last miserable little campsite on the lip of the Staked Plains, surrounded by blackened fire pits and the frosty stone rings where tipis had stood. Returning to Lakota Country would mean heading north into the teeth of one of the worst winters in memory — something too ghastly to contemplate, with Nebraska starving, and southern Kansas a graveyard littered with the bones of the buffalo. Instead we headed west, into the direction of death and sunset, searching for Smells Sweet's Snakes.

And found nothing. No sign of game. No sign of Snakes. Nothing but empty rutted trails radiated out from the buffalo wallows. Veering south-east, we searched the heads of the canyons that split the plateau.

I fell ill again. Not with fever or diarrhea, but with the sick lassitude that signals starvation. My stomach shrank. I made soup for Raven and Nothing by boiling grass roots, rawhide, and crushed bone. They ate it, but the soggy

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mess did not tempt me. As I weakened, more work fell on Yellow Legs. Despite having two wives, he was the one who took down the lodge and made up the travois each morning. With one person doing most of the work — and a man at that — our little camp lurched across the bleak expanse, making less progress each day. But then we did not seem to be going anywhere special.

One dark silvery dawn the sun cut a new notch on the black horizon, but Yellow Legs did not leave the tipi, no longer having the strength to strike camp. Here it ends, I thought. We had six horses left, and we had to choose one to kill and eat. That would leave five starving ponies to carry the lodge, packs, and four people. You can get only so far feeding on yourselves.

Breaking the ice scum on a small arroyo, I drew breakfast water. Grass stalks were slippery with frost, and a dark mist hung on the northern horizon. More snow was coming. I could smell the damp smoky odor of a blue norther on the way. Beneath it was another smell, earthy and familiar, but harder to place. Back by the tipi I started a fire, searching through my Medicine bundle, looking for something that might give strength and flavor to the stew. All I found were the four cactus buttons Healer had given me.

Turning Healer's gift over in my hands, I thought how her most dire predictions had all come true. Now was the time to find out if she had given me a Helper, or merely hexed me. Scraping the fuzz off one with my thumbnail, I tested it in my mouth. The bud was bitter, with a sharp green undertaste. Chewing it puckered my mouth. Swallowing was like trying to put away the whole cactus, thorns and all. I washed it down with dirty ice-water.

Nothing happened. The bitter little button neither filled me up, nor tempted me to take another. So much for Healer's helper.

The wind picked up. Dead grass bowed back and forth, rippling like a cyclone was coming. Flecks of whistling sleet sizzled in the fire. Taking the horses around to the lee side of the tipi, I heard Nothing crying inside. My big, stolen American horse looked as poor and bony as any Snake pony. The others were in worse shape. I ducked into the lodge to see to the baby. Raven was asleep, and Yellow Legs was having a hapless time trying to calm his daughter. Smiling, I took the baby from him, holding her inside my blanket, against my milkless breast. Though Yellow Legs was a doting father, his daughter already treated me as her second mother.

As soon as I stepped back outside she quieted. Babies often react that way to light and air. By now snow was pouring out of the sky, smothering my fire.

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Time to go back into the tipi. But the bright snowfall had lulled the baby. By now I was resigned to never having the child I wanted, so I sat by the tipi hugging weak little Nothing — my poor replacement. This was what my Medicine dream had meant. I was headed for the Hereafter. Ahead of Crazy Horse, Bloody Knife, Myles Keogh and the Custer brothers. Having no choice, I had to accept that. Starving and freezing were no worse than sleep.

But at least I was dying clean. By lying to Stone Calf I had saved Catherine, Sophie, and heaven knows how many Sheyenna children who would not have survived the Staked Plains. There was a certain rough justice in my being left behind, to face the fate my lies had saved them from. My Medicine felt lighter. I had a reason for coming all this way — and I was ready to face the consequences. Searching my stock of Medicine songs, I found only one that fit such a desperate situation, and sang it softly to the storm:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now I'm found,
Was blind, but now I see.

As the words welled inside me, I felt a prickly anticipation, as though the cactus bud were spreading through my veins. The storm broke into a million colors. Rainbow flames raced along the white ground, then shot up to meet the snow, like a Fourth of July on the plains. Amazed and delighted, I sang louder, my voice carried upward by the colors:

T'was Grace that taught my heart to feel
And Grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that Grace appear,
The hour I first believed.

The storm seemed to slacken. The rainbow flames sank down, smoldering at my feet. I heard a stirring inside the tipi, as though someone were fumbling with the entrance flap. Dark patches of smoke condensed in the whiteness, growing bigger, smudging the shimmering curtain of snow. Holding tight to Nothing, I sang to the dark patches in the storm:

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Through many dangers, toils and snares,
We have already passed.
T'was Grace that brought us safe thus far
And Grace that keeps us all.

The nearest shadow thickened into the image of a great buffalo bull forging through the wall of snow, striding toward me in absolute silence. I did not think to flinch, knowing this midwinter mirage would dissolve in a moment, like Coyote and the Camp of the Dead. Instead I marveled at the minute detail in my Medicine vision. The black tips on his curving horns. The frost clung to his broad curly shoulders.

Then I felt his steaming breath puffing from flaring nostrils. My imaginary bull was about to trample me. I scrambled to get out of his way. He brushed past, real and solid, giving me a wary look from under long brown lashes. He was immediately replaced by a second bull, equally big, equally real. Another bull followed, then another. Shadow after shadow loomed larger, each one becoming a buffalo. Falling snow turned to steaming mist, melted by the heat of shaggy bodies.

Lurching to my feet, I saw brown backs stretching off on all sides, their living mass blocking out the storm. I pulled back my blanket so Nothing could see. The child was awake and squirming in my grip, dark eyes scanning the huge beasts, brown fingers holding tight to my dress. Yellow Legs stood up in the lodge entrance, hands quivering at his side, croaking in ecstatic Sheyenna, "It is the Southern Herd."

They plodded purposefully along, in no particular hurry, parting as they passed our lodge, each buffalo giving us a brief glance, before being replaced by another. Yellow Legs stepped out to join me. Raven sat up, propped in the entrance. Now we were among the cows and calves, strong young animals like we had hardly seen all summer. After so much hardship and horror, the great herd was here at last; the life blood of the southern plains flowed past us, warm, earthy and intoxicating. I could feel the deep rumble as millions of hooves mashed through the snow, shaking the Staked Plains clear down to the cap rock.

Morning melted into afternoon, and still they kept coming; uncurious, unafraid, unending. We sat huddled against the lodge alongside our horses,

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humbled by the sheer mass of the herd, lulled by the steady beat of its hooves. I napped, and awoke to the same scene; the buffalo passing, Yellow Legs sitting and smoking, Raven nursing Nothing; our hunger, our worries, our weakness, overwhelmed by this outpouring of life. I could barely remember how bleak and barren the Staked Plains had been.

Not until it was nearly dark, and the herd began to thin, did Yellow Legs dare bring down a cow with his bow. As her kin continued to pass, he said a short prayer for the spirit of this cow, and of every buffalo, then ripped open the belly with a two-handed pull of his knife. While I made a fire, Raven laid Nothing beside the steaming body cavity. The little girl giggled and moved about, licking blood from her fingers. I spread out a deer hide and Yellow Legs heaped meat on it: fatty back ribs, thick steaks, and the intestines, liver and kidneys. We roasted the meat on sticks, stuffing it half-cooked into our mouths, cracking the bones to get at the marrow. Wolves and coyotes padded past, a couple stopping to sit at the edge of our firelight, looking for an easy meal. Later, lying in the tipi next to Yellow Legs, I heard them snarling over scraps and bones.

Morning dawned bright and empty. Seeing the Staked Plains stretching from horizon to horizon, I might have thought the day before was a dream, but the snow around us was churned into frozen slush, dirty with buffalo dung. Yellow Legs collected the fat from our kill, boiling it in Raven's pot along with herbs and melted snow to make a Medicine soup. Which sounds revolting, but we soaked it up, swallowing it in great gulps. I felt a thousand times better. Lassitude and starvation fell away.

Yellow Legs and I broke camp, eager to be off. There was no question about direction. The Southern Herd was heading down off the Staked Plains toward Indian Territory. Descending past the line of the cap rock, we saw knots of buffalo grazing in the canyons. Two days before we would have greeted them with with shouts of thanksgiving, unable to believe our luck. Today we just noted how beautiful their bodies were, how sleek and majestic, then went on. Nothing would satisfy us except to see the whole of the herd. Our tired horses could not catch up until late afternoon. Coming out of the canyons I saw the herd again, this time from a distance under clear skies, a broad brown river flowing east toward the Big Muddy. The buffalo seemed to be headed for the agencies. I could not imagine a greater irony than a million buffalo arriving in mass, just as the southern tribes were being penned up to starve on stringy government beef.

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In a couple of sleeps we were looking as fit and sleek as the buffalo. Raven gloried in her returning strength. Late in the evenings, rolled in my buffalo robe, I could hear the soft thunk, thunk of a scraper at work outside the lodge. Winter robes are the warmest, and it is easiest to scrape off excess flesh when the hide is stiff and frozen.

Crossing the Red River, we bid a grateful goodbye to the great state of Texas, entering Indian Territory. Lines on the map did not matter to the buffalo. The herd flowed straight for where the Wichita Mountains stood up on the horizon, deep within the reservation shared by the Kiowas, Kiowa-Apaches, and Honey-Eating Snakes. Rising straight out of the plain, the Wichitas form a granite gateway — beyond them lay the Chisholm Trail, and Fort Sill. I remembered a Kiowa tale about how the buffalo fought the soldiers, going right onto the grounds of Fort Sill, trampling the fences and gardens, trying to drive the Long Knives away. I had thought this was wishful exaggeration, but now I was not sure. Were the buffalo going to throw their bulk against the fort? No army regiment carried enough bullets to kill them all.

We camped at the northern edge of the Wichitas, on a night filled with nervous expectation. About midnight I heard a soft padding outside the tipi. A now familiar voice called out inside my head, *"American Woman, open up and give a friend some meat."*

Lifting the entrance flap, I saw Old Man Coyote sitting on his haunches, looking smug and hungry. Raven got right up and began to cut bite-sized bits of jerky, while our husband produced his Medicine pipe — both acting as if midnight calls from talking coyotes were the most normal thing imaginable. The greedy beast snapped up jerky as fast as Raven tossed it to him, basking in the smoke Yellow Legs blew his way. *"Isn't it wonderful,"* he declared, *"having the buffalo back?"*

"But what does it mean?" By now I had given up treating Coyote like a dream. If anything the world seemed too real, too rich, balanced on the brink of some all consuming event.

Coyote laughed. *"To a Wasichu, everything must have a meaning."* Raven and Yellow Legs laughed with him, saying it was certainly so.

"But what is going to happen?" I demanded.

Coyote looked at me slyly. *"It is your Medicine that has brought us here — you of all people should know."*

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Yellow Legs and Raven thought so too, asking, "What will the Wasichu do? Will the Long Knives fight the buffalo? Will they let the Kiowa and Sheyenna hunt?" I was their resident sage on customs and folkways of the wild Wasichu, but I had no ready answer. The herd was certain to attract Kiowas, Snakes, and eventually soldiers. But even hard-bitten cavalry troopers had to be awed by this. The buffalo promised to bring peace and plenty to the starving agencies.

Suddenly Yellow Legs gestured for silence. "The herd is moving." We scrambled up, stepping out of the tipi. Under frosty stars I could feel the beat of hooves, moving off, fading away. It was unusual for a herd to move at night, unless they were spooked or stampeded.

Despite our weariness, we broke camp at once. Wanting to stay as close as possible to this moving miracle, we walked our horses through the darkness, following the broad trail left by the herd. Normally, night tracking is incredibly frustrating, but tonight it was ludicrously easy. We did not have to see, or even feel the million hoof prints that broke up the ground — the rumble of the herd, the howl of wolves, the odor of buffalo all marked the way. By the time it was light enough to ride I was supremely exhausted, swaying in the saddle. Coyote loped along with us, his tongue hanging out.

The Wichitas have little in the way of foothills, rearing directly out of the flats. Morning light reflected off the peaks like giant granite prisms, turning the slopes purple, yellow and crimson. A thin patch of breakfast smoke hovered over a fold in the northern slopes, marking a Snake or Kiowa camp. The buffalo seemed undeterred by the mountain barrier, though they were prairie beasts and I had never heard of them climbing much of anything. The herd surged straight into the mountains.

As the ground rose up, I reined in, seeing a miracle more awesome than anything in my dreams — easily the most amazing thing anyone ever saw sober. The largest and nearest peak in the Wichitas split at the base. The rent opened in dead silence, widening as it went upward. There was no earthquake, no lava, no volcanic action; the mountain just peeled back, like a tipi splitting along a seam. Instead of pumice and magma pouring out, I saw a world open up within the mountain, a world without snow or winter, a world filled with sunlight, where plums hung heavy on the trees.

This was the Spirit World. No question about it. Not a little glimpse like in a fever dream, but the broad land itself, laid out before me. The bards'

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undiscovered country that we are all headed for. Sitting there on my big American Horse, I watched the herd thunder into the gap in the mountain's flanks. I moved my mouth to speak, wanting to say something to Yellow Legs, to get human confirmation. But he and Raven were already headed into the gap, not questioning what they saw anymore than the buffalo did.

Nothing had prepared me for this. Not my dreams and Medicine visions, nor my conversations with Coyote. Turning in the saddle, I looked back at the real world behind me. It was bleak and stark, locked in winter. Nearby was the morning smoke of a camp that might or might not be friendly. I could go back, alone, into a hungry world torn by war and hatred. Or I could go on into a world that vibrated with towering clouds, green leaves and ripe plums. Coyote trotted past, turning his head to ask, *"Are you coming, American Woman?"*

The plums decided it. My mouth ached to taste fresh fruit, to ease the bleeding sores beneath my tongue. Kicking my big American horse, I followed Old Man Coyote and the Southern Herd out of the cold gray morning, into a world where the summer sun stood directly overhead.

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Coming Attractions

Our January issue arrives at the beginning of December, right smack in the middle of the holiday season. Even those of us who pretend not to like the holidays (and we know who we are, don't we?) can't help but be caught up in the seasonal change. The lights are different and at least here in the Northwest, people smile more. Magic lurks around every corner.

January isn't officially a holiday issue, but it will have a few holiday stories. In last year's January issue, **Nina Kiriki Hoffman** created a small sensation with her story about Matt, a homeless woman who finds a bit of warmth at Christmas. Matt makes a return appearance this year in "How We Come A' Wandering."

Christmas isn't the only year-end holiday. **Harlan Ellison** explores Chanukah in his science fiction story, "Go to the Light." It was, as his protagonist Matty Simon says, a time of miracles. Only how miraculous things could be surprises everyone. Even Matty. Especially Matty.

Our cover story, though, has no holiday tie whatsoever. Instead, **Michael Coney** provides us with a rip-roaring adventure in a land of very real games. **Gary Lippincott** illustrates "Bulldog Drummond and the Grim Reaper" in a manner so breathtaking you'll wish you had an extra copy to frame.

Looking ahead to the New Year, we'll have a powerful new novella by award-winner **Jack Cady**, a ghost story from **Ray Bradbury**, and stunning science fiction from **Lewis Shiner**. And that's just for starters. So renew your subscription now. You don't want to miss a single issue.

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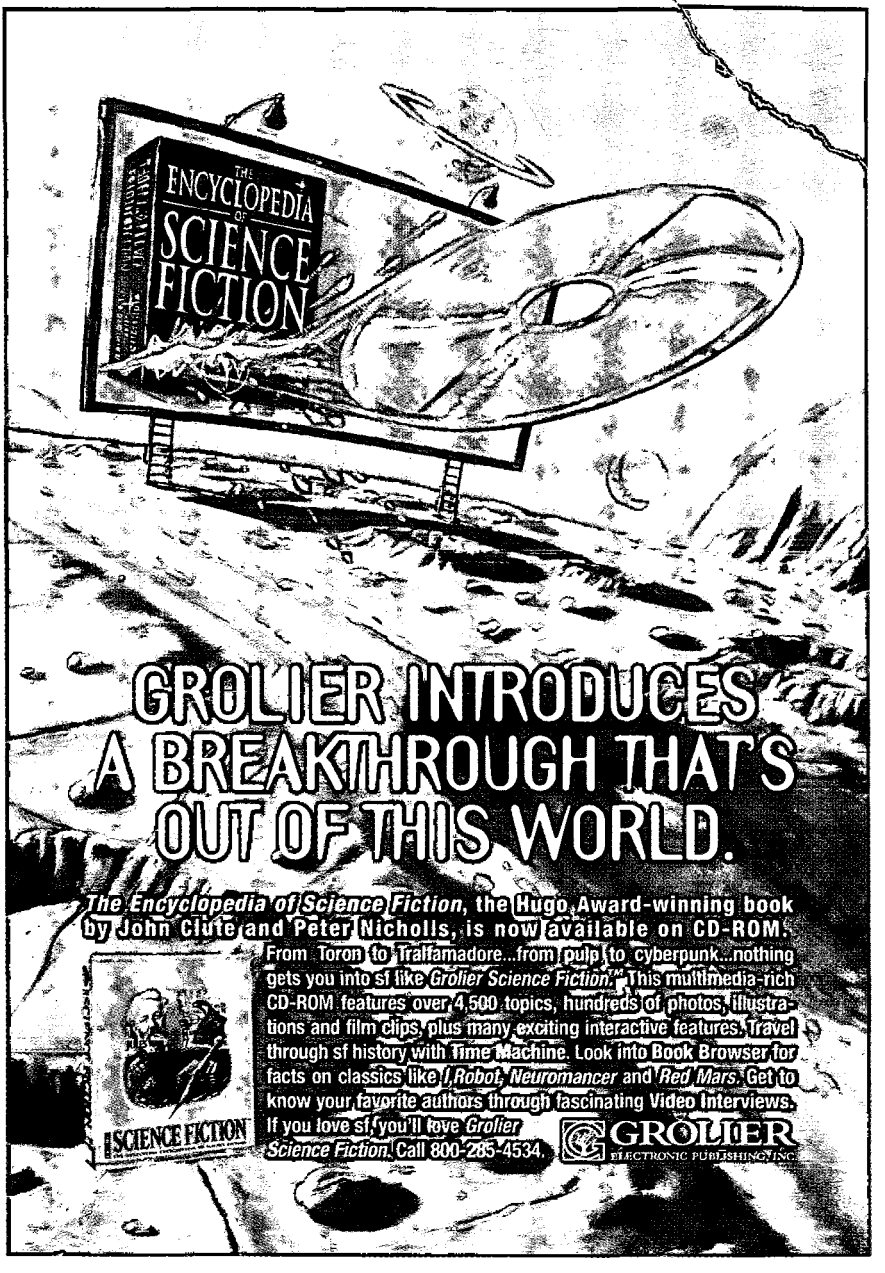
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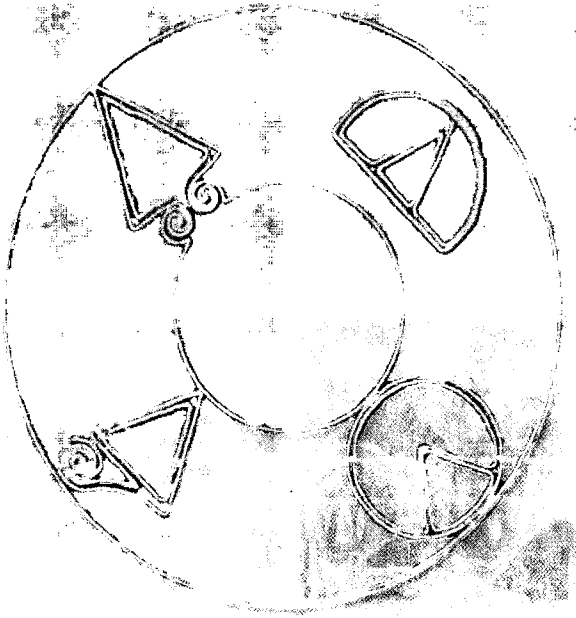

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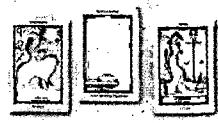

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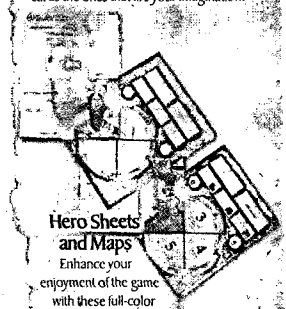

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